



Legal Services of North Dakota

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LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION

Legal Services of North Dakota

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Medical-Legal Partnerships & Disaster Legal Services

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Informational Testimony

HB 1623

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Chairmen Bekkedahl and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information about the intersection of legal services and health and human services, and thank you for your dedication to rural health.

Legal Services of North Dakota is a 501(c)(3) non-profit with a mission to compassionately and respectfully address the legal needs of vulnerable populations to provide timely access to justice, while empowering our community with education and knowledge. We are eager to share our knowledge with you today as you make appropriations for rural health grant funding. This testimony will provide an overview of two legal services programs that improve health outcomes, especially in rural areas: Medical-Legal Partnerships and Disaster Legal Services.

Medical-Legal Partnerships are Human Services programs that provide an avenue to legal referrals for healthcare patients with legal needs that are exacerbating health issues. At LSND, we regularly see how civil legal issues intersect with health outcomes for rural residents, particularly around housing stability, domestic violence, benefits access, consumer debt, and family law. These issues often surface alongside health challenges and, when left unaddressed, create ongoing barriers to treatment, recovery, and stability.

While LSND does not currently have a formally funded Medical-Legal Partnership program, we are already engaging in informal MLP-type collaboration with health care providers across the state. One example is our work with Community Medical Services, where legal issues arise alongside opioid use disorder treatment, an area that is understandably receiving significant attention and investment in North Dakota. In these settings, legal problem-solving supports patient stability and helps reduce disruptions that can undermine recovery and care plans.

As the state explores rural health transformation in a holistic way, we wanted to flag Medical-Legal Partnerships as one model other states have used to address social and legal determinants of health, particularly in rural and frontier communities. These models focus on early identification, education, and coordination rather than litigation, and they often build on relationships that already exist between health systems and community-based providers.

LSND already operates statewide, including in many rural counties, and works closely with clinics, shelters, and social service organizations. These partnerships are also beneficial when administering our Disaster Legal Services program. Disaster Legal Services is a public health program that addresses the legal needs of disaster survivors related to housing, public benefits, consumer protection, and family law.

LSND's Disaster Legal Services Program has been working to improve the disaster safety net in the state by providing information to disaster relief organizations, offering a forum for organizations to connect, and reviving the statewide disaster relief coordination non-profit VOAD – Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster. Disaster response is an essential component of public health because prolonged disaster recovery and unaddressed disaster issues - such as an insurance claim denial that delays repair of disaster caused housing damage like standing water, which causes mold – can force disaster survivors into unhealthy circumstances.

Legal Services has achieved many successes related to disaster relief and public health. LSND worked with First District Public Health in Minot to provide feedback on family resource centers for airplane crash victims and educate First District about the legal responsibilities of airlines following a crash; Disaster Legal Services team members at LSND have collaborated with the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services to prepare the newly revived VOAD for disaster relief coordination; and LSND offers monthly Town Halls that include important updates related to public health policy, resources, and needs.

Additional information about Legal Services of North Dakota and the legal needs of North Dakotans are included materials with this testimony.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share how our work positively impacts rural health in North Dakota. We look forward to answering your questions and providing more information as needed.

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