

Mark Heinert
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Mountain Plains Youth Services (DBA: Youthworks)
Testimony in support of SB 2030
Senate Appropriations Committee – Education and Environment Division
January 21, 2025

Chairman Sorvaag and Members of the Committee:

My name is Mark Heinert, and I am here today to deliver testimony in support of SB 2030. I have been a licensed social worker in North Dakota for 34 years, serving homeless youth for the last 28. I am the Assistant Executive Director, and Homeless Programs Manager at Youthworks, a private, non-profit, youth serving agency in North Dakota. I am also a member of the North Dakota Coalition for Homeless People, and the Missouri Valley Coalition for Homeless People, currently serving on the board of director for both organizations. It has been my pleasure to work alongside the legislature over the last 30 years to ensure all North Dakota residents are housed.

Youthworks supports the recommendation of the Interim Government Services Committee to increase the appropriation to \$10 million for the North Dakota Homeless Grant (NDHG), administered through the North Dakota Housing Finance Agency. SB 2030 also appropriates \$1 million for the Department of Public Instruction to provide supports to homeless students by homeless liaisons. One time funding of \$200 million to support the Housing Incentive Fund is also included in SB 2030, which is integral in growing the number of affordable housing units in North Dakota. Youthworks fully supports all aspects of this bill including the provision to conduct a homelessness study.

Youthworks believes that all youth deserve to have a safe place to belong and be heard. One way of fulfilling this mission is to provide housing and support services

to young adults (ages 18 – 24) and their children. For decades, the housing and services were based primarily out of Bismarck and Fargo, until 2022, when services expanded to Minot.

Youthworks has a long history of success raising funds from federal sources, which require local matches. Without the support of the NDHG (or other local funds), Youthworks is in jeopardy of losing over \$1.1 million in federal grant funds annually, which are dedicated to serving homeless youth. Last year, Youthworks was able to receive \$50,000 of NDHG funds to support this work. Although helpful, there is a need for over five times this amount (\$266,690) to match the federal dollars that are now committed to Youthworks. The increased budget request (\$10 million) will support the need for more match money for federal grants.

As homeless providers coordinate housing and services for the homeless, the most vulnerable in our population are served first. This includes the elderly, victims of domestic violence, trafficking victims, former foster youth, Black, Indigenous People of Color, LGBTQ+ youth, people with disabilities, and all children. One out of every three homeless young adults served by Youthworks are former foster youth.

The most cost-effective way of helping vulnerable homeless people is to provide supportive housing, which is what Youthworks and other agencies are using NDHG funds for. Without an intervention, studies suggest that a homeless youth can cost society between \$500,000 and \$1 million over the course of their lifetime (emergency room visits, shelter placements, incarceration costs, etc.). By allocating funds to house and serve homeless youth, North Dakota will be saving millions of dollars for future generations.

Although supporting this bill makes sense fiscally, this issue is far more personal. I encourage you to imagine for one moment that you have lost your housing. Maybe it was due to a job loss or a family breakup. You may have been in foster care as a youth, a victim of domestic violence victim, or both. It seems like no one cares about what happens to you. You have bounced from one friend's house to another's until you have no more options. You are surviving day to day. It's hard to get a shower or some food, let alone find a place to live. You just need some help to get back on your feet, but everywhere you go, they say that don't have enough money to help you. Maybe next week they will have money. Maybe next month. You are desperate for help..... Each day in North Dakota, we have 865 unique individuals who are in this very position, and thousands more who are experiencing housing insecurity and are at risk of homelessness. I ask each of you to consider – is 1/1000th of the Governor's budget too much to ask to help the vulnerable people in our state that are homeless?

Passing SB 2030 is a good step towards dealing with the “big picture” of homelessness in North Dakota. We must invest in providing emergency shelter and supportive housing, so that we can help people transition into longer term stability. It is the right thing to do from a humanitarian and a fiscal perspective. I urge this committee to recommend a “do pass” on SB 2030.

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