

**Testimony from Chandler Esslinger, Fargo Moorhead Coalition to End Homelessness
North Dakota Senate Appropriations: Education and Environment Division
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SB 2030**

Good afternoon, Chairman Sorvaag and members of the Committee,

My name is Chandler Esslinger, and I am the Executive Director for the Fargo Moorhead Coalition to End Homelessness and the current Board Chair for the North Dakota Coalition for Homeless People. Having participated in the Interim Government Services Committee study on Housing and Homelessness, which helped to generate the recommendations for this bill, I am here to provide my testimony in support of SB 2030.

Proposed in SB 2030 is a comprehensive multi-pronged approach to addressing homelessness through several specific interventions. To help contextualize the impact SB 2030 would have on our efforts to prevent and end homelessness across North Dakota, I'd like to focus on the three components of our homelessness response system:

1) Inflow into Homelessness

One of the most cost-effective ways we can address homelessness is to prevent it before it happens. In fact, through the evaluation of local programs in Fargo/Moorhead, the United Way of Cass Clay has demonstrated a 5-to-1 return on investment for every \$1 put towards homelessness prevention. Local organizations that are funded through programs like the North Dakota Homeless Grant succeed every day in preventing homelessness in our communities, but the number of families facing homelessness continues to rise, meaning without commensurate investment to scale up programs to meet demand, we risk seeing further increasing homelessness across our state.

Arguably the most influential factor that determines which communities will struggle with increasing homelessness is the availability of housing. Put frankly – are there enough places for people to live that they can afford? What we see in too many communities across North Dakota is one of two things: communities are either facing a scarcity of housing, meaning there are simply not enough units of housing available to meet demand, or communities have a mismatch of the housing that is available compared to what is affordable to the households who live there. Through an infusion of resources to the Housing Incentive Fund, communities across North Dakota will finally have the stable gap funding required to make significant strides in developing the housing required to both meet demand for units and demand for affordability.

Ensuring that there is adequate housing availability in general, as well as adequate affordable housing, is a homelessness prevention strategy. When safe, decent, and affordable housing is available to all, fewer people are at risk of becoming homeless. The combination of the North Dakota Homeless Grant and the Housing Incentive Fund are powerful tools in preventing homelessness before it begins.

2) Crisis Response

When we talk about addressing homelessness, it is likely the first thing that comes to mind is emergency shelter. Shelter is a crucial part of crisis response, ensuring that those who experience homelessness have access to a roof over their heads. Shelter saves lives.

Unfortunately, for many households in North Dakota, the zip code in which you live is likely to determine what types of resources you have access to. Many communities across the state have no shelter, and those that do are likely to be at or over-capacity. In my community, Fargo-Moorhead, we know that on average there are 330 shelter beds available each night. Based on data from the Shelter Bed List on one night in January, there are approximately 182 additional households seeking shelter who were unable to access it. This number is likely an undercount of the number of households, representing adults, families, and children, in need of shelter, which means it is safe to assume that there are over 200 households in Fargo-Moorhead alone who do not have access to shelter when they need it.

Homeless Liaisons in schools are also a crucial component of crisis response, ensuring homeless youth and their families are given the support and resources they need to move quickly out of homelessness when possible. Homeless Liaisons are a largely unfunded federal mandate, meaning most school districts across the state do not have a full-time dedicated staff to support this vital resource which helps to improve attendance, increase graduation rates, and ensure connection to community-based resources.

SB 2030 provides support for crisis response through increased investments in both the North Dakota Homeless Grant as well as the support for Homeless Liaisons in schools. NDHG funds activities like emergency shelter operations and rapid rehousing. Both activities are crucial in addressing a household's housing crisis and charting a path toward stability. When Homeless Liaisons in Schools are adequately funded, our communities are better able to identify and support these families in their movement out of homelessness.

3) Outflow into Permanent Housing

One of the biggest opportunities for improvement we have across our state in addressing homelessness is to ensure we have adequate availability of housing, specifically affordable housing, so that households can move quickly out of homelessness and into a stable environment. When housing units are not available, or there is a mismatch between what is available and what people can afford, we see more people staying homeless longer, exacerbating their crisis and driving them further into homelessness. This in turn puts additional strain on the shelter system and homeless service providers, creating a vicious cycle where some of our community members are sentenced to a lifetime on the streets, cycling in and out of jail, emergency rooms, shelter, and other expensive and undesirable situations.

With a significant investment in the Housing Incentive Fund, communities across North Dakota would be able to ensure there is adequate housing available in general, but specifically adequate affordable housing. Investment in the Housing Incentive Fund is a homelessness resolution strategy. When our communities can maximize the number of people entering permanent housing, we get even closer to the ultimate goal of making homelessness rare, brief, and one-time.

For these reasons, the FM Coalition to End Homelessness and the North Dakota Coalition for Homeless People respectfully encourages a do-pass of SB 2030 to address the housing and homelessness crisis across North Dakota.