

House Appropriations, HR Section
Senate Bill 1012
Senator Dever, Chairman
March 18, 2025

Chairman Dever and members of the HR Committee,

My name is Scott Burtsfield, and I am extremely honored and privileged to serve as the Executive Director for the Vocational Training Center (VTC), a licensed service provider supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, located in Fargo, North Dakota. I want to thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in favor of SB 1012.

Our organization has been in existence since 1962 and currently provides a wide array of supportive services to nearly 200 of the state's most vulnerable adults - people with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities (I/DD). Throughout our organization's 60-plus years of existence, we have experienced many changes and reforms in this field. Through it all, the fundamental element to our success, and the success of the individuals we support, has always been our Direct Support Professionals (DSPs).

It is on behalf of our state's supported individuals and the Direct Support Professionals supporting them that I am expressing my deepest concern regarding the lack of quality service enhancements and inflationary increases as proposed in the Governor's budget as well as committee recommendations.

North Dakota's DSPs work in a range of settings, including family homes, a supported individual's own homes, intermediate care facilities, small community residential group homes, community job sites, vocational and day training programs, and others. They provide critical round-the-clock care and supports to individuals with disabilities - many of whom need help with personal cares such as toileting and bathing, help with managing behavior and severe health issues, support to live and work in their community, and assistance with the simple day-to-day tasks that many of us take for granted. Universally acknowledged, the work of the DSP is back-breaking, hazardous, stressful, and physically and emotionally exhausting.

Unfortunately, often detracting from providing the much-needed support services, North Dakota's DSPs are increasingly held to incredible measures in terms of what is expected of them in their day-to-day work. Since the implementation of a new payment system in 2018, we have experienced the

development of rigid new standards, added training criteria, and increased data collection and data entry requirements - much of which falls on the backs of already overburdened and overworked DSPs.

North Dakota's DSPs, in many cases, have greater responsibilities, require higher levels of training and skill sets, and take on greater liability than Certified Nursing Assistants or other professional Health Care Assistants. However, DSPs do so without higher-level credentialing, without the compensation, and without the formal recognition found in the abovementioned fields. Rather, much of their time is spent capturing and reporting data, all of which takes time away from providing the actual services they were meant to do.

Sadly, in observing various committee sessions, I have oftentimes heard SB 1012 mentioned as "real money," or referred to as too expensive. Unfortunately, I have also noticed the "1012" shredder impertinently sitting so predominantly in the Harvest Room. While I understand the message you are trying to convey, I wish to remind you that a large portion of SB 1012 entails funding for individuals with Developmental Disabilities – this is essential funding for the state's most vulnerable population as well as the workforce that supports them.

Our DSPs continue to see the cost-of-living rise while their spending power decreases. They are finding it much easier and tempting to find employment outside of our field, especially when most major retailers and other local industries such as service jobs, warehouse and fast-food positions are offering better pay with much less risk, pressure, responsibility, and regulatory requirements. Our DSPs are not only falling behind, but they are also being left behind. For example:

- Many local manufacturers' starting pay is nearly \$4.00 per hour more for an entry level position.
- Average Administrative assistant salaries statewide are near to over \$2 per hour more than our DSP's.
- Locally, McDonald's, Walmart, COSTCO, AMAZON, KFC and many others have starting wages greater than the DSPs in those communities, and without the added data requirements, training, and responsibilities.
- Many other state budgets are receiving more spending flexibility, better legislative consideration, and higher levels of support for their respective fields compared to DD services in North Dakota.

Sadly, this has been part of the perfect storm for North Dakota's DD providers. Throughout this recent period of increasing regulatory requirements, miniscule inflationary increases, costly unfunded mandates (such as CQL Accreditation), intensified data requirements, escalating operational costs, increasing inflation, the inability to remain competitive in an overly aggressive labor market, and rising

costs of employee- related expenses... provider organizations are being forced to explore ways of doing much more with much less.

As you may be aware, unlike hospitals and many other service industries, our current rate structure prohibits providers of disability services from raising rates to remain competitive or to keep up with increasing costs of doing business, leaving us at the mercy of the legislative process.

In the IDD field, DSP turnover is high. Morale is often tested. Recruitment and retention, while historically problematic, are astonishingly difficult. Waiting lists are growing because there are no staff to deliver support to new people with IDD in their homes or other services. Unfortunately, due to staff shortages and high vacancy rates, community programs and services for people with IDD across the country have started cutting back and even closing — many permanently.

In addition to expressing my support for the NDHHS Developmental Disabilities Division budget (which includes a much-needed rate adjustment to Day Services) I urge you to please cast aside the Governor's recommendation and support NDACP's request by adding 4%/3% inflationary increases, respectively, for each year of the biennium for service providers and the Direct Support Professionals we employ.

Please prioritize the state's most vulnerable population as well as those that support them.

Again, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in favor of Senate Bill 1012.

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