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Testimony in support of HB 1012

House Appropriations Committee – Human Resource Division

March 26, 2025

Good morning, Chairperson Dever and members of the committee:

My name is Melanie Heitkamp, and I am the Executive Director of Youthworks, a private non-profit youth-serving agency. We have provided services in North Dakota since 1986. Our age demographic is 11 to 24, primarily adolescents and young adults. The services we provide include emergency shelter, housing for homeless youth, family counseling, individual counseling, skills groups, anger management, case management, crisis response, street outreach, drop-in services for basic needs, day programming for youth suspended or expelled from school, and anti-trafficking work with survivors of human trafficking and exploitation. We are the Attendant Care provider for law enforcement in Bismarck, Fargo, and Minot, and we operate emergency shelters in those communities.

I am also a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and have worked with thousands of families in my 45 years working with Youthworks and in my earlier practice in rural county social services.

Our mission at Youthworks is to provide a safe place for all youth to belong and be heard. We provide a non-judgmental place where youth and their parents can receive immediate help and support. Our goal is to prevent youth from entering the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and our outcomes in achieving these goals are strong.

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I am here to speak to the urgent need for funding that extends beyond the limits of Title IV-E. While Title IV-E services are vital, they do not support the comprehensive case management and prevention services families need to stay safely together and out of that system. Without investment in broader, more flexible funding streams, families fall through the cracks.

In North Dakota, the CHINS (Children in Need of Services) program is a critical resource for families dealing with truancy, parent-child conflict, runaway behavior, and early signs of substance use. In State Fiscal Year 2024 alone, more than 2,100 referrals were made, serving over 1,450 children. However, the reality is, the CHINS program is merely a referral source for mainstream services, not an ongoing service. This is not a judgement against the CHINS program, but a recognition of the number of children and youth in need of services statewide. With 91% of CHINS referrals living at home at the time of referral, we know that these are not youth who need to be removed from their homes—they need targeted, community-based intervention.

The data also shows that 75% of CHINS youth had prior contact with the child welfare system, and 20% had previous involvement with the juvenile justice system. These numbers highlight the preventive potential of early intervention: without timely support, these youth are at high risk of deeper systems involvement. We must act upstream, not downstream.

Previously, diversion funds provided through the courts allowed us to intervene quickly and holistically with families in crisis. When responsibility for CHINS moved under the Department of Health and Human Services, those court-based diversion funds were discontinued, leaving a gap in service delivery. We need sustainable, dedicated funding to provide diversion services that meet families where they are, before crises escalate.



For more than three decades, Youthworks served as a diversion program for youth across the state, working closely with families, schools, and courts to provide timely interventions. During that time, more than 95% of youth remained safely in their homes, avoiding deeper system involvement. Diversion services were a natural extension of our continuum of care, aligning with existing supports like crisis response, emergency shelter, case management, and counseling. As we look to the future, Youthworks plans to become a Title IV-E Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT) provider, enhancing our ability to deliver evidence-based, family-centered services that prevent out-of-home placements and strengthen family systems.

In my experience, most of the youth I've worked with did not need to be placed on formal probation or removed from their homes. What they needed was early, meaningful intervention from professionals trained to work with adolescents and families in crisis. Without this intervention, families often become overwhelmed, communication breaks down, and the likelihood of out-of-home placement increases.

Addiction, mental health struggles, poverty, and housing instability all compound these challenges, and traditional services often remain out of reach due to cost or availability. Our crisis response and case management teams work quickly and effectively, without unnecessary bureaucracy, to stabilize families and guide them toward longer-term supports.

Thank you for your time today. I urge your thoughtful investment in the services and supports that will keep families intact and youth out of costly systems involvement. We need funding models that match the real needs of children and families—models that include case management, mental health and substance use treatment, and family preservation efforts not supported by Title IV-E. I may be reached at 701.255.6909 or mheitkamp@youthworksnd.org if you have any questions regarding my testimony today.