



**House Bill 1012**  
**Senate Appropriations Committee – Human Resource Division**  
**March 26, 2025**  
**Senator Dever, Chair**

Chairman Dever and Members of the Senate Appropriations, Human Resources Division, my name is Missi Baranko, I live in Richardton ND and I am the Executive Director of USpireND, a nonprofit organization in North Dakota that serves children, families and child care providers. USpireND has two main programs, Inclusion Support ND and Healthy Families ND. Both programs receive financial support in the forms of grants and contracts administered by the Department of Health and Human Services and part of HB1012.

I am here today to testify in support of HB1012 and to share the impact it has on children, families and childcare providers.

The first program I am going to talk about is our Inclusion Support program. For your reference, Inclusion Support is one of the contracting partners with the Early Childhood Section of the Department. We are specifically tasked with providing outreach and technical assistance, in the forms of consultation and coaching, to early childhood providers caring for children with special needs and children who require additional support due to challenging behavior, health or developmental needs.

We have five Inclusion Coaches dedicated to supporting early childhood providers across the entire state. In FY24, we offered coaching and consultation to 259 separate early childhood programs with over 1700 instances of support. The support provided is tailored to the unique needs of each child and provider. Our goal is to leverage our expertise in inclusive practices to ensure all children with special needs and disabilities are included in child care settings and routines, and that providers have the necessary support and resources to achieve this.

We know that being a childcare provider can be difficult and meeting the individual needs of all children while also balancing the other needs of the program can feel overwhelming. We also know that early childhood providers want the best for all children in their care.



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Child care providers often seek coaching and consultation to better support children with disabilities in their care. For example, a provider might reach out for guidance on creating an inclusive early childhood space for a child with autism. They may need strategies to help the child engage in group activities and communicate effectively with peers.

Another provider might request assistance in adapting daily routines for a child with physical disabilities. They may need advice on modifying play areas to ensure accessibility and safety, or on using adaptive equipment to support the child's participation in various activities. Additionally, a provider caring for a child with sensory processing issues might seek consultation on managing sensory sensitivity. They might need tips on creating a sensory-friendly space and incorporating sensory breaks into the daily schedule to help the child regulate their sensory input.

In each case, the Inclusion Coach offers tailored support, drawing on their expertise to provide practical solutions and resources. This ensures that all children, regardless of their abilities, can thrive in a nurturing and inclusive child care setting.

Inclusion Coaches also provide coaching and consultation to early childhood providers in applying for and receiving the Inclusive Care Support Grant, which is administered by the Department. This grant is designed to provide financial support to licensed or self-declared early childhood programs in creating and maintaining inclusive environments that support children with disabilities or developmental delays to learn, grow, play and develop alongside their peers. This funding has had a huge impact on providers' ability to care for and continue caring for children with unique needs. We have seen programs use this funding to add staff to lower ratios so they can provide more 1x1 care for a child, completed remodeling to ensure their facility is accessible, purchased materials such as sensory equipment, specialized seating or communication devices and participated in training opportunities to gain knowledge to be able to better support children with disabilities.

On March 25th, Kay Larson, Early Childhood Section Director provided you with an overview of the Early Childhood Section. I want to draw attention to the one time funding areas, specifically the Providers Grants and Shared Services, which has seen a decrease from the Agency budget to the Governor's budget from \$7,000,000 to \$5,000,000. And then again, another decrease to \$2,500,000 from House Appropriations. I am encouraging you to consider adjusting this amount back to \$7,000,000 to ensure providers continue to have access to vital grants such as



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the Inclusive Care Support Grant, providing funding to early childhood providers caring for children with special needs and disabilities.

In addition, you will see a one time funding request related to Inclusion Support. This funding ensures we can maintain the employment of five Inclusion Coaches, which allows us to respond in a timely manner to all requests received for Inclusion Support. I also encourage you to take time to read the testimonies, already uploaded, from child care providers who are not able to be here today as they are caring for our children.

At this time, I would entertain any questions related to our Inclusion Support Work and then would like to proceed with my testimony regarding our Healthy Families ND Program.

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Healthy Families North Dakota is a home visiting program, and we are thrilled to announce that we are celebrating 25 years of offering free home visiting services to families across our state! Our longevity and success in this space is due to the strong partnerships we have with the Department of Health and Human Services and local communities.

Healthy Families ND currently offers home visiting services to families in ALL 53 counties across North Dakota. It is our focus to ensure we are reaching out and connecting with families, including our most rural areas, bringing services and supports to them in their home and community. Although we do not use income as a factor for eligibility, our most recent data indicates that 52% of enrolled families had an income of \$20,000 or less at enrollment.

Healthy Families North Dakota (HFND) focuses on improving maternal and child health, increasing child development, school readiness & family economic self-sufficiency while also preventing family violence and child abuse and neglect. Through this work we strengthen families while creating thriving communities and saving tax payer dollars. Healthy Families ND is accredited through *Healthy Families America*, the nationally recognized, evidence-based home visiting program of Prevent Child Abuse America. Using a two-generation approach, home visiting through HFND assists parents in developing the skills and confidence to raise healthy children and increases family well-being by preventing adversity and building resilience during the most critical years.

HFND is always free & voluntary, with services beginning at a variety of times, focusing on the first three years of a child's life. By using a two-gen approach, HFND builds well-being by



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intentionally and simultaneously working with children and adults in their lives. This approach aligns opportunities to optimize each person's potential. The results are healthy parents with family-supporting jobs, healthy children meeting developmental milestones, and better-connected individuals able to participate in civic and family life.

Due to partnerships with the Department, specifically Title IV-E Prevention Services under the Children and Family Services, A2A (Alternatives to Abortion) under Public Health, Women's Health Services and Opioid Settlement Funding under the Behavioral Health Division, we were able to complete over 4000 visits with families across the state in FY24.

This blended approach to funding ensures sustainability for our program and supports families with unique backgrounds, risks and needs in accessing vital home visiting supports regardless of where they may live in North Dakota.

Healthy Families ND was the first program in the state to partner with the Department to access Title IV-E Prevention services. Healthy Families is one of the programs rated as "Well supported" by the Evidenced Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare which allows our program to access this funding. This means the program has been researched and proven to prevent child abuse and neglect and reduce the number of children entering child welfare and foster care, which is a cost savings to both the state and federal government.

In FY24, we provided vital home visiting services to 207 families due to Title IV-E Funding. Without this funding we would be unable to provide services to these families and would not be able to offer services statewide.

The second funding source I would like to highlight is the A2A, Alternatives to Abortion, through Public Health, Women's Health Services. A2A provides reimbursement for home visits with pregnant women and parents caring for children twelve months of age or younger. Through this work we provide prenatal, postnatal and parenting education supports to families.

The last funding source I want to mention is Opioid Settlement Funding. In December 2023, we participated in the competitive grant application process with the Behavioral Health Division to receive funds from the Opioid Settlement. Our USpireND Healthy Families ND program was one of 14 programs chosen to receive funding. This funding has allowed us to receive reimbursement for costs related to providing home visits to parents who are struggling with substance use, in recovery or incarcerated. The funding also supported reimbursement for



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training costs to provide professional development opportunities to all staff, specific to working with parents experiencing challenges with substance use.

Our Healthy Families ND program has over 50 separate funding sources and funders to create a sustainable program, but without the above-mentioned partnerships and funding we would not be able to continue to provide services to all referred families in all counties in North Dakota.

Thank you for your time today, allowing me to share the impact HB1012 has on vital home visiting services in our state. I encourage you to support funding in this budget request related to Title IV-E Prevention Services, A2A and Opioid Settlement Funds.

*Missi Baranko*

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