

SENATE HUMAN RESOURCE APPROPRIATION COMMITTEE
MARCH 26, 2025
HB 1012

Chairman Dever and members of the Committee, my name is Doreen Eichele, Chief Operations Officer for the Dacotah Foundation.

Our agency wishes to lend our support to the proposed budget presented by the ND Department of Health and Human Services. We have been an advocate for community mental health and substance use disorder services and have been a provider of facilities and services since 1970. Members of this committee have been very instrumental in providing the funding that has been vital to the development of these services for our constituents.

Dacotah Foundation has been a partner and collaborated with NDDHHS to pilot and provide multiple levels of residential services throughout our history as a provider. We have responded by identifying unmet needs and investing in facilities where services can be offered.

Our agency provides a full continuum of care from crisis stabilization to transitional and independent living. Our current residential services are 24/7, 365 services. These residential and community-based services have helped positively impact on the lives of a vulnerable population that require specialized assistance and help navigating their recovery.

Services currently provided collaboratively with NDDHHS (81% Budget):

Category	Bismarck	Fargo	Total
Crisis Stabilization	15 Beds/ 1 Site	15 Bed/ 1 Site	30 Beds/ 2 Sites
Transitional Living	20 Beds / 2 Sites	23 Beds/ 2 Sites	43 Beds/4 Sites
Permanent Housing Support Staff	40 Ind/1 Site		40 Ind/1 Site
Recovery Center	30-40 Ind Daily		30-40 Ind Daily
Community Med Management	40 Ind/Daily	40 Ind/Daily	80 Ind
Medical Transportation	20-30 Ind Daily		20-30 Ind Daily

Dacotah Foundation strives to maximize the funds we receive to meet the needs of as many individuals as possible and meet our contractual obligations. On any given day we could make contact with 243 individuals through these residential and community-based services.

One example of this effort is our recovery center and the role it plays in assisting individuals seek and connect to services. The Dacotah Recovery Center is located in Bismarck and provides individuals that self-identify as having a mental illness a place to come together with their peers. They are offered support and education groups. More recently efforts have been directed towards connecting to resources and further case management services to meet the unmet needs of our members and community. This program encounters 30-40 individuals on

most days and provides access to resources that assist with housing, food baskets, employment, and support from their peers. Sometimes it is a place to shower and do their laundry. Staff are available to identify needs, assist where they can, make referrals to connect them with other services in the community and sometimes just meet their basic needs. We have seen an increase in access to this service within the past 4 months. This program and staff intervention reduces the need for higher levels of care. We have sought other funding options to enhance the contract we receive from the NDDHHS through partnering with community service employment programs like NICOA, local food pantries, county nursing and private providers. This program also hires individuals with lived experience that are in recovery.

You have already heard from the Regional Human Service Centers of the need for continued and strengthened funding. We would like to reiterate that need and ask that you give strong consideration to their budget request. This continuum of community and residential services would not be possible without the ongoing support that your committee provides to the Division and its Regional Human Service Centers and private providers. The funding of this budget provides vital residential and community-based services and supports the members of our communities who are seeking mental health and substance use recovery. Your financial support of the NDDHHS budget also saves other State agencies time and financial resources in emergency response, hospitalization and incarceration.

Dacotah Foundation also provides independent housing options for individuals that find it difficult to obtain and maintain housing. These facilities and programs are supported by lease payments, fees, and local donations. (19% Budget)

Category	Bismarck	Fargo	Total
Independent Living	65 Beds/6 Sites	7 Beds/1 Site	73 Beds/7 Sites
Money Management Services	130 Ind	130 Ind	260 Ind
Youth Mentor	45 Ind		45 Ind

While our primary locations of direct service are in the Bismarck-Mandan and Fargo communities, we have also shared information and collaborated with other agencies and regions to build and implement similar services.

As was addressed in Kandia Qual's testimony, our needs continue to be workforce development and retention. Each of the residential programs has staff ratio requirements depending on the level of care. These positions are high intensity and require well-trained individuals with specialized skills and understanding in areas of behavioral and physical health. Staff are often involved in situations with residents who are experiencing elevated psychiatric symptoms and medical needs that can easily and often escalate, requiring emergency interventions. Our staff also needs to know how to deescalate situations and to mitigate risk to both the resident and staff when behaviors are heightened.

To provide the level and quality of care expected, our agency needs to be able to be competitive in our salary and benefits. Our budgets are 85% salary and benefits. Our ability to recruit, train and retain staff is greatly impacted by the lack of adequate funding and a more competitive salary structure. A living wage in ND for a single adult is estimated to be \$19.78/hr. (Bismarck \$20.27; Fargo \$18.74). This outpaces our starting wages by \$4.00/hr. You have also heard from other agencies providing direct services who also have high turnover rates due to noncompetitive employment markets. We too need to be able to navigate the employment market by increasing our wages.

Due to workforce challenges, current staff are called on regularly to fill shift shortages which create burnout and impacts budgets due to overtime pay. They are also asked to provide additional training for new staff all while providing vital care for individuals with intense needs. While our turnover rates have improved over the second half of this biennium, we are still in great need of staff. Higher turnover also impacts on budgets negatively as we are expending additional training funds. We feel that increased wages will have a positive impact on turnover.

We, like other providers of direct care, need to find a way to draw more interest to the behavioral health field. While we understand there is more than just money that draws individuals to a certain field, we also understand their ability to meet their financial needs is one of the first considerations when pursuing a career. We believe providing better pay and benefits is a means of taking the first step toward staff retention and workforce development.

Many of our positions are filled by staff who have their first experience in the behavioral health field. They find they truly have an interest and passion in this field but need to be able to support themselves in a financially challenging economy. We see direct service positions as playing a huge part in building a workforce for the future. We want to encourage growth in this industry by providing adequate wages and a path to more opportunities. This entry level experience also helps grow staff for future provision of higher levels of mental health services in a field that struggles with workforce retention. We have had staff that began employment with our agency and have since grown in the profession and are currently supporting and working for NDDHHS. We currently have several individuals working for us that have chosen to pursue further career development in psychiatric nursing and social work due to their experience with our agency. We are also an employer of second chances employing individuals that have life experience and want to give back to others and are building a career path for themselves.

You have a very ominous job of pulling all this together to meet the needs of your constituents. Current funding for mental health services, without the requested increases, jeopardizes the ability and capacity to provide services into the future. We need your favorable support to the NDDHHS budget to continue these important and necessary services.

It is very difficult to draw a full picture of the impact your funding of these programs has and will continue to make. We would like to extend an invitation to any members of your committee wishing to tour our facilities, see our staff in action, and observe how your funding of these services is used to help support individuals in need.