

Testimony on SB 2096

Senate Appropriations - Human Resources Division
January 20th, 2025

Chairman Dever and members of the committee,

My name is Peggy Calderon, and I am a social worker committed to advocating for the rights and dignity of individuals I serve with mental illness. I strongly support SB 2096, which calls for establishing regional treatment facilities across North Dakota, and ask you to vote yes on this bill.

Behavioral health care must be delivered in a manner that unequivocally promotes integration, recovery, and community engagement. Centralizing care in a large state hospital undermines these values and risks reversing decades of progress in mental health care. Research has shown that individuals with mental illness heal most effectively when they are surrounded by their families, communities, and support systems. Isolation only deepens suffering and disrupts recovery.

The current model in North Dakota, the State Hospital, faces issues with overcapacity, inadequate staffing, and lengthy transport times, which adversely affect individuals in crisis. The answer is not to construct another centralized facility. Instead, we must prioritize regional facilities that keep individuals close to their communities and provide care in environments that promote recovery, dignity, and respect for everyone.

A decentralized model of care is more cost-effective, improves access to services, increases community involvement, and promotes continuity of care. North Dakota is a predominantly rural state, and the proposed \$300 million investment in the State Hospital represents a significant financial commitment concentrated in a single community, which does not effectively address the widespread needs of the rural population. By providing care closer to home, we can improve mental health outcomes and reduce barriers to seeking treatment.

I ask the committee to vote yes on SB 2096 and prioritize regional care. Decentralized services uphold justice, equity, and dignity while addressing the state's overwhelmed behavioral health system. This decision will shape the future of mental health care in North Dakota.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Peggy Calderon, LBSW, LSW, LADC