

Testimony on SB 2096

Senate Appropriations - Human Resources Division

January 20th, 2025

Chairman Dever and members of the committee,

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

Behavioral health care must be delivered in a way that promotes integration, recovery, and community connection. 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, struggles with overcapacity, insufficient staffing, and long transport times that negatively impact individuals in crisis. The solution is not to build another centralized facility, which only reinforces these problems. Instead, we must prioritize regional facilities that keep individuals close to their communities and provide care in settings that support recovery, dignity, and respect for all.

A decentralized model of care is more cost-effective, improves access to services, increases community involvement and promotes continuity of care. A study has shown that community-based services reduce hospital days by 65% and expenses by 50% (Integrityinc.org, 2015). Further, community care connects individuals to local social networks and resources, enhancing their sense of belonging and increasing the likelihood of recovery (Bromage et al., 2017).

The financial investment in a state hospital of \$300 million represents a sunk cost in a single community. By instead investing in regional facilities, we can distribute resources more effectively and ensure that mental health care is accessible and equitable for all North Dakotans. Studies indicate that decentralizing healthcare investments improves both access to care and the resilience of the system (Abimbola et al., 2019).

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.

Amber Andrews