

Testimony Prepared for the  
**Senate Human Services Committee**  
February 11, 2025  
By: Lynn Flieth, RSR Human Service Zone Director  
RE: HB 1070 — Relating to Children’s Health Insurance Program

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Chair Lee, and members of the Senate Human Services Committee, my name is Lynn Flieth. I am the Director for the RSR Human Service Zone, which includes the counties of Ransom, Sargent and Richland. In addition, I am a member of the North Dakota Human Service Zone Director Association. I’m here today to provide testimony in support of HB 1070.

Human Service Zones provide economic assistance and child welfare services, which includes child protection, foster care, in-home case management, and handling CHINS (Child In Need of Services) referrals.

The Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) helps meet the needs of working families who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid, but who cannot afford health care coverage for their children.

Our state unemployment rate is lower than the national average, which may create the impression that North Dakotans shouldn’t struggle to access adequate healthcare coverage. But residents in our state do face barriers to securing employment that compensates them with sufficient wages and health benefits. Other financial and environmental factors can also create barriers to affording medical coverage and care in our state.

North Dakotans haven’t been immune to cost of living increases. While wages have increased modestly, they have not maintained pace with the rising costs of goods, services, and housing. The median rent in Bismarck is about \$1,289 per month,<sup>(1)</sup> and the median list price of a home in North Dakota is well over a quarter of a million dollars.<sup>(2)</sup> The debt-to-income ratio in our state also increased by over 41% between 2013 and 2023.<sup>(3)</sup>

Families who live paycheck-to-paycheck feel these pain points acutely. Those in urban areas tend to face higher housing costs, while those in rural areas tend to be farther away from key resources. Approximately 75% of towns in North Dakota with a population of less than 2,100 people don’t have a grocery store.<sup>(4) (5)</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.zumper.com/rent-research/bismarck-nd>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.redfin.com/state/North-Dakota>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kxnet.com/news/top-stories/nd-records-highest-debt-to-income-ratio-increase-in-america/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ndliving.com/node/544>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.northdakota-demographics.com/cities\\_by\\_population](https://www.northdakota-demographics.com/cities_by_population)

These financial challenges are compounded by the cost of healthcare in our state. According to a 2022 study,<sup>(6)</sup><sup>(7)</sup> North Dakota ranks sixth in the nation for healthcare spending costs. The average cost of a prescription in our state is over \$200 dollars. Nationwide, the average cost for common ailments like upper respiratory infections, back problems, and urinary tract infections, is between \$1,000 and \$4,300 dollars.

It's also worth noting that when it comes to accessing standard medical care, rural North Dakotans spend more on travel time, gas money, and the vehicle maintenance costs associated with higher-mileage driving. To find specialized care, North Dakotans often have to travel even further.

Unfortunately, for families living paycheck to paycheck, essentials like health insurance and medical care often take a back seat. Immediate needs like food, housing, and heat come first; and even those are not always secure. Alarming, the median emergency savings for Americans nationwide is only \$600<sup>(8)</sup> — so without coverage, a single visit to the emergency room can deal a serious financial blow.

By raising the CHIPS eligibility limit from 200% to 250% of the federal poverty limit, we'll reduce the risk of those emergencies, and we'll make a crucial investment into the health and wellbeing of children and families in North Dakota. The Human Service Zone directors strongly urge a "Do Pass" on this bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I stand for any questions from the committee.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nicerx.com/blog/healthcare-costs/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.kxnet.com/news/state-news/healthcare-costs-in-the-us-nd-ranks-high/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.empower.com/press-center/37-americans-cant-afford-emergency-expense-over-400-according-empower-research>