

Testimony Prepared for the
Senate Human Services Committee

February 11, 2025

By: Dennis Meier, Three Rivers Human Service Zone Director

RE: HB 1072 - Foster care homes for children and adults

Chair Lee, and members of the Senate Human Services Committee, my name is Dennis Meier. I'm the Director of the Three Rivers Human Service Zone, which includes the counties of Morton, Sioux and Grant. In addition, I'm a member of the North Dakota Human Service Zone Director Association. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 1072.

Human Service Zones provide critical services for North Dakota communities. We administer economic assistance programs. We also administer child welfare services, which include child protection, foster care, and in-home case management as well as receiving referrals for Children in Need of Services (CHINS).

When zones are tasked with finding placement for children who can't reside in their parents' homes, we try to place them with extended family members and "fictive kin" — like a neighbor, a teacher, or a coach. We do this because even when home is not a safe place to be, it's also traumatic to be removed from home. Living with a familiar face and a loving connection offers children more certainty and relational continuity during a time when nothing else is normal.

However, even when we can identify relatives and kin, they don't always have the means to provide long-term care for a child. As you are aware, raising kids is costly. Our agencies offer some support to help cover costs like beds and clothing; but the ongoing expenses of food, childcare, and extracurricular activities are often too much for relatives and kin to absorb over an extended period. Additionally, foster home licensing and adoption processes can take weeks or months, which creates another barrier to placing children with people they know and love.

Relatives and fictive kin have been eligible for maintenance payments for approximately two years, which has been a game-changer for our zones. It has provided emotional and placement stability for children. However, the demand for these placements is still so high that Child and Family Services have leveraged emergency temp employee positions to process requests to ensure optimal, legal emergency care for children. By ensuring that unlicensed relatives and fictive kin remain represented in our Century Code, you're supporting better emotional, relational, and academic outcomes for children who receive out-of-home placement.

By expanding maintenance payments eligibility to legal guardians, this bill helps alleviate financial barriers for caregivers who have committed to guardianship of children needing long-term care.

Strengthening support for relative and kin caregivers is one of the most common-sense approaches we can take to ensure that people don't have to choose between caring for a loved one and experiencing poverty, and to ensure that our welfare system remains agile in its effort to provide safe, stable, and comfortable homes for children in need of placement.

On behalf of the North Dakota Association of Human Service Zone directors, I urge a do pass on HB 1072. Thank you for your consideration.

I stand for questions from the committee.