

Testimony Prepared for the  
**Senate Human Services Committee**

January 13, 2025

By: Desiree Sorenson, Mountrail McKenzie Human Service Zone Director

**RE: SB 2112: Related to Life Skills and Transition Center**

Chair Lee, and members of the Senate Human Services Committee, my name is Desiree Sorenson. I am the Director for the Mountrail McKenzie Human Service Zone, which includes the counties of Mountrail and McKenzie. In addition, I serve as Vice-Chair of the North Dakota Human Service Zone Director Association. I am here today to provide testimony in support of SB 2112.

Human Service Zones are the legal designee of the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services (NDHHS) to perform an array of human service duties. This includes foster care case management and legal custodian duties for children in our foster care system. In the past, Human Service Zone Directors have brought to the legislature's attention the struggles at meeting the needs of difficult to place children. When a child enters the child welfare system and they are unable to be placed (for a variety of reasons) in a relative placement, foster home, therapeutic foster home, psychiatric residential treatment facility (PRTF), or qualified residential treatment program (QRTP) there becomes no option but to find less suitable arrangements. This in the past has included the human service zone staff providing 24/7 care and supervision of the child in a hotel or office setting. I am happy to say that there are currently zero children being hoteled by the Zones due to the hard work of the Zones, and that we want this continue to remain the case in the future. Since 2019, Zones have had 5 denials for admission or early discharge. CFS implemented performance-based standards and if a QRTP denies an eligible child the QRTP does not receive the performance

payment. It is my understanding that efforts and conversations are occurring to consider performance-based standards for PRTF facilities as well. Some state family foster care homes are taking these complex cases, but the child is not eligible for a community/family setting. When that happens, we do our best to wrap services and supports into that home as they are very much a blessing to the case planning when we know we have a willing provider. However, they get tired, and they cannot be up 24-7 like a facility staff who rotate shift work, etc. When a child has a change of placement due to the child needing access to higher level of services to support their mental health, intellectual needs (that don't meet Developmental Disabilities requirements), and behavioral needs. This poses an array of challenges, risks, and liabilities. However, the child needs shelter and care and as legal custodians, we have a responsibility to the child. Yet we at times are left with no suitable options and in a demanding situation.

In 2024, the North Dakota Human Service Zone Director Association forwarded a position letter to ND HHS regarding our concerns for complex needs youth to identify solutions. Discussion was held with various HHS leaders and all (19) Human Service Zone Directors. Subsequent conversations were held with HHS leadership and the Governor's Office. As a result of those conversations, SB 2112 originated.

We all agree that the behavioral health continuum in North Dakota has gaps. Complex needs children are a population of North Dakota citizens that are significantly impacted by this gap. We desperately need a safety net. We understand that the Life Skills and Transition Center is not designed to care for this population of youth. However, it is a state owned and operated residential center that has professional medical and care staff. While this may not be a long-term solution, we urge passage of SB 2112 as a safety net for youth that are in need, that meet the criteria outlined in the bill.

North Dakota needs time to determine how best to develop a long-term solution. However, today's complex needs children in the child welfare system cannot continue to wait. We need an option today so that we may care for all children with the care that they deserve.

Thank you for consideration of my testimony regarding Senate Bill 2112. I stand for questions from the committee.