

Human Service Committee Testimony SB2138 – January 13, 2025 – Community of Care

Chairman Lee and members of the Human Services Committee, my name is Myrna Hanson. I am the Executive Director of Community of Care, a nonprofit serving older adults in rural Cass County. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. We also want to thank you for the funding we have received through the Department of Human Services budget. Those dollars are assisting clients to remain in their rural Cass County homes.

I would like to give you a brief description of Community of Care and the services we provide. We began as a pilot project of the Good Samaritan Society in 2003. We serve all of rural Cass County, a 1,700 square mile area with 27 rural communities. A few of the communities include Arthur, Page, Casselton, Kindred, Harwood and Buffalo. Throughout our 21-year history, we have provided all of our services Free of Charge, regardless of a person's economic situation. We have a wide range of funding in addition to the Department of Health and Human services funding. In 2024, we received 62% of our funding from local fundraisers, donations and rural Cass county grants.

In 2024, we served approximately 680 individuals, the final numbers for 2024 are still being compiled. Many of these individuals received multiple services in multiple program areas.

We describe our program as a 4-legged stool:

- The One Stop Service Center is staffed by our Social Worker who provides information, referrals, care coordination, assistance securing in-home equipment & services, help with paperwork such as applications for fuel/food/prescription assistance & Medicaid, Advance Care Plans and Medicare Part D drug plan enrollment. Our Care Coordinator

and a trained volunteer/retired pharmacist assisted 367 individuals review their Medicare Part D plans during open enrollment 2024. The average savings was \$313 per person. In 2023, our Care Coordinator and 2 trained volunteers assisted 370 individuals with an average savings of \$1,511 per person. Our Care Coordinator also coordinates socialization events, an important element in older adult's health. Our staff regularly assist adult children of aging parents with information, assistance securing in-home equipment or services.

- The Faith Community Nurse program staffed by a three part-time licensed RNs who have completed Faith Community Nurse certification. One serves in Northern Cass through our Arthur office, another in Casselton and the 3rd was added in the Kindred area in April of 2024. The Faith Community Nurses are licensed RNs who focuses on preventative care. They provide outreach visits to help older adults understand medical conditions, physician's orders and medications. The Faith Community Nurses assess, education and refer. They facilitate blood pressure screenings and assist clients complete Advance Care Plans. They work with Health Cabinets representing the local communities to identify needs and sponsor educational events. Faith Community Nurses also facilitate Bone Builder exercise classes in 7 locations. Each week, approximately 100 older adults gather twice a week to exercise. In the most recent survey, 80% of respondents reported the classes improve their mobility and 79% reported class participation improves their cognitive ability. One bone builder participant shared the following, *"Bone Builders keeps me feeling younger. Without*

Bone Builders I'd feel more stiff and unable to do the things I need to do to function at my optimum." The Faith Community Nurses also coordinate pen pal/journal project and Fun With Tech between older adults and local middle and high school students.

- The Volunteer Program facilitated by a part-time Volunteer Coordinator. The most utilized aspect of the Volunteer Program is transportation to medical appointments. A ride to their medical appointment is often a critical element in older adults' ability to remain in their rural home. In 2024, our volunteers drove 10,721 miles bringing clients to medical appointments. In This included 174 rides and 478 hours of volunteer services. The round trip from Casselton is approximately 50 miles and from Page in the Northwest corner of the county is 100 miles. In our most recent client survey, 100% reported the ride to their medical appointment assists them to remain in their rural home. Volunteers provide a wide range of service. In 2023, a total of 303 individuals served in some capacity of our program. In total, volunteers provided 2,498 hours of service. This includes board of directors, transportation volunteers, school students with spring yard work, bone builder leaders, Wellness Screening & Health Fairs, fundraiser committees, health cabinets, local college students, etc. Our 2024 volunteer numbers are still being tabulated.
- Support and Education are provided through presentations, website and our newsletter mailed twice a year to every box holder in rural Cass County. Each year we coordinate programming for the Casselton Business Association Senior Day. Our Faith Community Nurses coordinate annual Wellness Screening Fair and Health Fair.

- Staff regularly work with other agencies such as North Dakota Assistive, Alzheimer's Association, Essentia & Sanford Paramedic Programs to coordinate care for older adults in rural Cass County
- Our staff includes 7 employees. Two full-time and 5 part-time. We have a 3.85 full time equivalent

Since we began, Community of Care has focused on the concept of "Aging in Place." In order to "age in place," individuals need access to medical care, adequate housing, transportation, a social support system and a supportive community. We believe those "Aging in Place" concepts are critical to Community of Care's programs. Throughout our history, we have continued to expand our programs and services based upon the needs of local residents in order for them to "Age in Place." Our strategic plan includes additional Faith Community Nurse staff or hours to assist greater areas of Cass County, including the I-29 corridor and the western portion of the county. Currently, our Faith Community Nurses cover approximately 40% of Cass County. This addition not only requires staff time, but also additional rent, phone, internet, computers, etc. to operate another office. The Care Coordination, Volunteer Program and Support/Education cover the entire 1,700 square miles of Cass County.

The majority of older adults prefer to remain in the homes and communities they call home. Most of our clients have lived in their homes and communities for decades, if not their entire lifetime. They are important members of the local community as they shop locally, support local events and share their community knowledge.

One example of our clients is Phyllis. She is 83 years old and lives alone in her rural Cass County home. Phyllis has a marvelous attitude, but has experienced numerous health concerns the past two years. Our Faith Community Nurse visits with her regularly to help her understand her condition and medications. Our Volunteer Coordinator has facilitated countless rides for Phyllis to attend medical appointments and weekly infusions, all provided by volunteer drivers. She has also coordinated spring yard work provided by local school students. Our Care Coordinator reviewed Phyllis's Medicare Part and completed a fuel assistance form. Our staff work together to arrange for in-home equipment and supplies for Phyllis. Our holistic care approach meets a wide range of needs for our clients.

Community of Care is a model for other communities to assist older adults remain in their rural homes. NDSU Extension received a grant to pilot our model in two other locations. For the past 3 ½ years, the Aging in Community Project have been assisting residents in Lisbon and Western Morton Counties. These programs are fully funded through the grant received.

Community of Care has provided consulting services to assist these locations develop their programs. We believe our model has potential to benefit locations and older adults throughout North Dakota and we are very willing to share our knowledge and experience.

Assisting older adults to remain in their homes as long as safely possible provides cost savings for individuals, their families and potentially the state of North Dakota. A significant percentage of our clients are renters without any equity and others own very modest homes in rural Cass County. If these older adults required a move to a long-term care facility, they would likely need to apply for Medicaid at the time of the move or very soon after.

I asked our Care Coordinator/Social Worker and Faith Community Nurses to identify the number of clients in their professional opinion who would have required long-term care in 2024 without our services. Our staff identified 15 individuals they believe would require basic care without the programs, services and referrals provided by Community of Care. The majority of these clients would require a Medicaid application within months of moving to basic care, which would be a significant cost to the state of North Dakota.

According to the ND Department of Health and Human Services, the average cost of long-term care in North Dakota in 2024 was \$147,164 per year. After the average social security benefit and \$100/month personal care allowance, the average balance remaining is \$124,571 per year. With a move to long-term care, the assets of many of our client's would be depleted quickly, resulting in the need for a Medicaid application.

As I shared, Community of Care has received funding through the Department of Human Services budget since 2009. We are grateful for those funds and have been able to serve hundreds of clients as a result. The amount we have received however has remained constant during those 15 years. According to Genworth financial, in 2009 the average cost of long-term care in North Dakota was \$56,940, as compared to the \$147,164 per year in 2024.

Community of Care is requesting an increase in our funding to more closely align with the cost of living increases over the past 15 years and the increase in the cost of long-term care in North Dakota. An increase in funding will allow Community of Care to serve greater number of clients and greater needs to assist older adults remain in their homes as long as safely possible.

Thank you. Are there any questions?