

Testimony Prepared for the
Senate Human Services Committee

January 28, 2025

By: Kim Jacobson, Agassiz Valley Human Service Zone Director

RE: SB 2176: Relating to the North Dakota Children's Cabinet

Chair Lee, and members of the Senate Human Services Committee, my name is Kim Jacobson. I am the Director for the Agassiz Valley Human Service Zone, which includes the counties of Traill and Steele. In addition, I serve as Vice-Chair of the North Dakota Children's Cabinet. I am here today to provide testimony in support of SB 2176.

The North Dakota Children's Cabinet was first established during the 66th Legislative Assembly (SB 2313). The Children's Cabinet consists of fourteen members. As an inaugural member of the cabinet, I have served since inception with the first meeting being held in November 2019.

The Children's Cabinet role is to assess, guide, and coordinate care across branches of state government and tribal nations. This is a significant responsibility and one that the cabinet has taken with great duty. The cabinet meets each month, and we learn about children's system needs and trends. We have heard about service gaps, challenges, and innovations. In addition, the Children's Cabinet has been diligently working on how to best employ the responsibility provided and to make a difference.

Over the last several years, the Children's Cabinet has been focused on studying other Children's Cabinet models in the United States to help guide our effectiveness and ability to impact. In result, a charter and strategic plan was developed and finalized in 2024. This is the road map to help guide the vision, mission, and goals of the Children's Cabinet. SB 2176 is a critical piece to support the work of the cabinet.

SB 2176 offers stability by relocating the staffing and administrative services from the department of health and human services to the office of the governor. We learned through our work over the past several years that the most impactful Children's Cabinets in the United States are located within their respectful governor's office. This supports a multidisciplinary approach and insight with governor's office priority setting. I believe that this would be an impactful change for North Dakota.

Despite the North Dakota Children's Cabinet meeting each month, there is much work to be done. The addition of designated working groups is critical to supporting the efforts of the cabinet. Workgroups would allow for focused study of assigned topics, could engage a larger span of those with subject-matter expertise and lived life experience to bring workgroup findings and recommendations before the Children's Cabinet. This concept allows for more effective work, reduction of systems conflict, while increasing the probability of positive outcomes.

There has already been at least one example of how a topic could be brought forward to the Children's Cabinet through a workgroup concept this legislative session. The testimony of Lynn Flieth, RSR Service Zone Director on HB 1095 called for collaborative work related to child protective services. She states that "because Child Protection Service activities transcend any single entity, and rely upon a community response, the original intent of this bill (HB 1095) may be more comprehensively and appropriately addressed in a coordinated effort through a statewide approach, perhaps through the Children's Cabinet. It would be beneficial to be inclusive of other service providers, law enforcement and the legal community along with the Child Protection system and schools to enhance understanding, strengthen systems, and to optimally support children and their families." This is just one example of ways that the changes proposed in SB 2176 could bring systems together to help build stronger support, wise investments, and improve care to North Dakota children.

I respectfully ask the committee for consideration of amendment. I ask for consideration for the appointment of a human service zone director (legal custodian of foster children in the public child welfare system) to be a standing member appointee on the cabinet. This would ensure a voice for one of our most vulnerable groups of children on the cabinet. Furthermore, I recommend to the committee consideration that one of the appointees listed on Page 2, line 5 be dedicated to a parent. While many of the professionals appointed to the cabinet are parents, it is a dual role. It would be beneficial for the cabinet to have a member whose primary appointment role is to represent the perspective of a parent.

Thank you for consideration of my testimony. I stand for questions from the committee.