

Senate Workforce Development Committee

Chairman Senator Wobbema

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## **Responding to the Children’s Behavioral Health Crisis: Support for House Bill 1035 and the adoption of the social work licensure compact**

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Chair Wobbema and members of the Senate Workforce Development Committee. My name is Kate Coughlin, Executive Director Nexus-PATH Family Healing.

Our nation’s leading pediatric health experts have declared the children’s behavioral health crisis so dire that it warrants a national emergency. In 2021, over 35% of ND high school students – grades 9-12 – reported feeling persistent sadness or hopelessness and nearly 1 in 5 reported seriously considering dying by suicide within the past 12-months (Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2021), equating to approximately 6,818 youth across the state. The challenges of recent years have only increased the need for timely access to high-quality mental health services.

Failure to ensure that mental health services are available when and where people need them has dire consequences for individuals, families and communities throughout North Dakota. In the current system, only four counties have the mental health resources their population requires. Only if you live in one of these more densely populated counties can adequate services be found.

As the Executive Director of a children’s mental health care provider, I can attest to the acute need to improve access to care by addressing workforce shortages while maintaining our high standards for professional practice. The adoption of the Social Work Licensure Compact provides an opportunity to do so and to improve the lives of countless children and families.

First and foremost, the Social Work Licensure Compact would enhance access to care for children, particularly in underserved and rural communities. By enabling licensed social workers to practice across member states without obtaining additional licensure, the compact allows mental health providers to quickly fill workforce gaps. This flexibility is especially vital in addressing urgent needs, such as those that arise in crisis situations and in areas with persistent shortages of qualified mental health professionals. Furthermore, the compact facilitates the provision of telehealth services, ensuring that children in remote areas can receive the support they need without delay.

The compact also establishes consistent standards for licensure, providing assurance that all participating social workers meet rigorous qualifications, regardless of their state of origin. This standardization not only safeguards the quality of care but also reduces administrative burdens for providers navigating a patchwork of state-specific licensure requirements. By streamlining these processes, the compact will

allow my organization and its providers to focus their resources on delivering care rather than navigating complex bureaucratic hurdles.

The Passage of the Social Work Licensure Compact will enable providers to recruit from a broader pool of qualified social workers, reducing delays in onboarding and ensuring that critical positions can be filled more efficiently. This is especially valuable in the context of children’s mental health care, where perpetual workforce shortages are experienced sharply.

Additionally, the compact supports continuity of care for families who relocate across state lines, such as military families or those moving to North Dakota for our boundless economic opportunities. Children can maintain relationships with their trusted social workers, ensuring stability and uninterrupted support during times of transition while providing a more simple exchange as patients change providers.

The compact can also help address the broader workforce shortage in mental health care. By easing the approval process for social workers to move between states, it reduces barriers to entry and expands the availability of skilled professionals to serve the people of North Dakota. This increased mobility benefits mental health providers and creates options for local communities. In addition, the administrative cost savings achieved through streamlined licensing processes may allow us to allocate resources more effectively, improving the supply and delivery of care.

Nexus-PATH supports the adoption of the social work licensure compact as proposed in HB 1035 and supports the passage of this legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you on this critical issue affecting the state of North Dakota.

We ask for a “DO PASS” recommendation for HB 1035.

## NORTH DAKOTA MENTAL HEALTH HPSA - 2023

### Mental Health - Health Professional Shortage Areas

