

## SENATE BILL 2394 SERVICES FOR PREGNANT MINORS

Mr. Chairman and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Jody Bettger Huber, Program Director for the Healthy Families program, a collaborative effort of many organizations whose fiscal and legal home is with Lutheran Social Services of ND. We currently serve at risk families in Burleigh, Morton, Grand Forks and Nelson Counties.

There is no issue more important to the future of North Dakota than raising our young children and supporting their parents. I am here today to describe the role Healthy Families plays in our state to support families and young children.

There is no denying that an infant's world is full of wonder and joy as they learn to play, explore and communicate with the important people in their lives. It is also a period of time when parents have the opportunity to positively impact and influence their child's future. For most expectant parents it is an exciting event, filled with congratulations, baby showers and dreaming about the future. But imagine that you are 13 or 14, 15 or 16, 17 or 18. For expectant or new parents who are young, and struggle financially and socially, who may have not completed high school, or have a drivers license, much less live independently this may be devastating. Add to that a history of addiction or mental health concerns, lack of family support and resources, a witness to or victim of domestic violence, and inaccurate information about parenting, the impact on the expectant parent as well as the impact they have on their child, may not be as positive as we may hope.

Research supports the fact that stressful situations experienced by any parent and lack of social supports can result in behaviors that may put a vulnerable infant or toddler at high-risk for child abuse or neglect. Young parents are especially at risk of being unable to meet the physical, medical, educational and emotional needs of their child. Children from birth to age three continue to be the age group most likely to be victims of maltreatment. Most of the maltreated babies are under age one and more than 1/3 were harmed during their first week of life.

Free and voluntary home visitation programs for parents such as "Healthy Families," are a great way to reach out to these high risk parents during pregnancy, with a focus on pregnancy wellness, and immediately after their child is born, emphasizing child wellness and parent self-sufficiency. Weekly home visits support parents progress in areas that are critical in preventing child abuse and neglect while encouraging healthy child development, "enhancing the potential for a healthy child."

Healthy Families Family Support Workers are well trained and well supervised paraprofessionals who teach parenting skills, serve as role models, provide tactics to reduce family stress, and connect families to valuable community resources. 28% of the parents served in Burleigh and Morton County since it started in 2008 have been parents 19 years of age and under. In the Grand Forks area 26% of parents were been 19 years of age or under. Parents receiving this type of intensive home visitor service show positive changes such as consistent use of preventive health services, increased high school completion rates for teen parents, higher employment rates, adequate housing, lower welfare use and fewer repeat pregnancies, increasing the potential to "enhance positive outcomes for minor parents."

Programs like Healthy Families provide a link that is greatly needed to support parenting teens in North Dakota and are a logical referral step for pregnancy counselors to make once it is ascertained that the choice has been made to parent. Right now this service is only offered in limited areas, leaving a vast hole in support services in other areas of the state. Healthy Families is currently offered in just four counties of North Dakota - in Grand Forks and Nelson counties since 2000 and more recently offered in Burleigh and Morton counties since 2008.

Healthy Families believes outcomes tracked since the beginning of services in North Dakota, speak to the success of the program and the families we serve. Our model of service delivery is evidenced-based, and builds on family strengths resulting in parents accepting responsibility for their children and their active involvement in making

decisions that positively affect their lives. Preventive health care is a priority of the program. Not only does it promote healthy children, it keeps health care costs down. 100% of our babies are on track with their immunizations and 98% of our babies are on track with their well baby checks. 100% of families involved in the program have a primary physician identified which helps to assure less use of emergency care services.

Most impressive, given that we are working with highly challenged families that screen into our program, is that only 18 of the 656 families we have worked with since the program began in ND have had services required by Child Protective Services. North Dakota Kids Count 2008 report showed, 6,982 or 4.9% of children in North Dakota were suspected victims of child abuse and neglect. For families participating in Healthy Families from July 2008-June 2009, only 1.49% of children were involved in Child Protection Services with all reports involving services recommended and 0% as services required. From July 2009-June 2010- 0% of families participating in Healthy Families were involved in Child Protection Services.

While traditional in office services remain critical to the health and well being of families, home visitation programs offer a unique opportunity to observe and serve parents and their children in the environment in which they live, which is especially important to teen parents. Home visitations also offer fathers an opportunity to participate. Healthy Families values the importance of involving fathers in parenting, as a result 58% of our at risk families include working with both mothers and fathers.

Home visiting programs based on 20 years of research have yielded the following positive results:

- greater use of preventive health services
- fewer emergency room visits
- lower incidence of low birth weight babies and prematurity
- reduced teen pregnancy and repeat pregnancy rates
- success in getting parents back to school and work

- better nutrition and less smoking and drug use during pregnancy
- reduced incidence of abuse and neglect
- fewer foster care placements
- promotes school readiness

Today I ask you to consider recommending that resources be made available to help assure these services expand to additional areas of the state. We know Healthy Families is an efficient and effective method of reaching this group of young parents and a supportive service that can help assure positive outcomes for the young child they are parenting.

Thank You

Jody Bettger Huber