

Testimony
Department of Human Services
Health Services Committee
Senator Lee, Chairman
January 10, 2012

Chairman Lee and members of the Health Services Committee, I am Alex Schweitzer, Cabinet Lead for Institutions and Regional Human Service Centers for the North Dakota Department of Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the department's telepsychiatry program.

The Department's regional human service centers and the North Dakota State Hospital have an active program of rural outreach services via a telepsychiatry program in numerous locations throughout the State of North Dakota. The following is a list of locations and services;

- Northwest Human Service Center (Williston) – Telepsychiatry services are provided for children, adolescents and adults.
- North Central Human Service Center (Minot) – Telepsychiatry services are provided for adults as needed for this region.
- Lake Region Human Service Center (Devils Lake) – Currently a DHS psychiatrist travels to New Rockford and Lakota monthly to provide services to nursing homes. In the very near future, this service will be provided by telepsychiatry.

- Northeast Human Service Center (Grand Forks) – Telepsychiatry services are provided in Grafton for follow-up doctor visits.
- Southeast Human Services Center (Fargo) – Telepsychiatry services are combined with on-site visits for the geriatric/psychiatric program at Sheyenne Care Center and the Valley City community.
- Southeast Human Service Center also provides telepsychiatry services to South Central Human Service Center (Jamestown) and Badlands Human Service Center (Dickinson).
- The North Dakota State Hospital is in the planning phase with Mercy Medical Center in Williston to provide telepsychiatry services so this facility can reopen a 5-6 bed inpatient psychiatric unit.

Other development includes:

- The North Dakota State Hospital will soon be piloting telepharmacy services at South Central Human Service Center and will eventually roll it out to all regional human service centers.

Allow me to provide, a real life example of how technology works: This past week, the Department's medical director was at the Sheyenne Care Center in Valley City with his laptop. He was able to write doctor's notes for the telepsychiatry work from the past week for Badlands Human Service Center and utilized his laptop camera to see patients at the Jamestown site to cover for a psychiatrist that was out ill.

Telepsychiatry is a vital tool in meeting the needs of statewide mental health consumers. The Department has a limited number of public sector psychiatrists to cover a large geographic service area, and therefore must utilize its psychiatrists in the most effective and efficient manner. The Department started a telepsychiatry program that is effectively meeting the mental health needs of consumers in rural areas. Planning is underway to expand telepsychiatry services to its more rural outreach sites, which will ensure that individuals in need of assessment, treatment and transportation will have access to mental health services in the state's most remote sites.

As well, there is a need for renewed emphasis on the recruitment of psychiatrists. This objective could be met by the continued collaboration between medical leadership at the Department of Human Services and the University of North Dakota Medical School, through psychiatric rotations for medical students and psychiatry residents at the State Hospital and regional human service centers, by the continued effort to recruit psychiatrists through the contract with the North Dakota Hospital Association and by providing tuition incentives and employment opportunities for students interested in medical school.

Thank you. I would be happy to answer any questions.