

Chairman Wieland, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you.

My name is JoAnne Vieweg. I am president of the Red River Valley Asperger-Autism Network which represents 85 families with children and adults with autism. I am also the grandmother of Colin, a 13 year old boy with Asperger Syndrome. My grandson and I had the privilege of speaking before you in April of this year.

I am speaking to you today in support of the alternative proposal recommended by Kris Wallman, president of the North Dakota Chapter of the Autism Society of America. I have participated in the Society's summit conferences over the past months and appreciate that many groups of people supporting children and adults with autism across the state have come together under the guidance of this organization.

Personally, I appreciate the work of the Task Force and recognize the efforts expended to research the needs of persons with autism in the state. I endorse the recommendations of the North Dakota Chapter of the Autism Society of America because they provide a viable program of implementation with an acceptable level of cost. It is imperative that we have accurate screening and diagnosis by well qualified professionals, have accurate records of the numbers of people requiring services, and a means for making services and treatment options available to all families in the state.

I see the need for the recommendations because my grandson was not correctly diagnosed until age 8. Professionals we dealt with earlier were not well trained in recognizing and diagnosing Autism Spectrum Disorders. We as a family also found it difficult to accept this diagnosis because we were not familiar enough with it and benefitted greatly from education by a professional who is very well versed in diagnosis and treatment of children on the autism spectrum. It was difficult to find services within the community that my daughter could afford because agencies did not provide them. The public school system had limited resources to meet my grandson's needs. In fact, his mother chose to remove him from the public schools until better services were available. As awareness has increased of the needs of children like my grandson, the school district has been able to provide more appropriate interventions and services for him. However, he is growing quickly and my fear is that services will continue to be lagging behind his needs. There currently is a lack of on-going support for learning how to live independently, adequate low cost housing, job training, job coaching, employer training, social outlets for persons on the spectrum and other means of having access to the community.

Colin is now thriving in the public school system with the addition of a district wide Asperger Teacher Coach and in-service training for teachers and support staff. The dedication of his teachers cannot be discounted either. Nevertheless, the services are not universal. Every week during our support groups I hear stories from families whose children are struggling in school, whose families are struggling to accept and understand the diagnosis, from families

unable to find resources and services within their communities, from families who are terrified of the future for their loved one, and from individuals with autism who are unable to adequately access the community.

There is an economic stress when needs of individuals are not met. With adequate diagnosis and on-going treatment, many people on the autism spectrum are capable of living independently and contributing to the community in significant ways, as long as their learning and living needs are met. Some of our most recognized scientists, inventors, artists and business leaders are functioning on the autism spectrum. Investing in early identification and accurate diagnosis, in proven treatments, and in on-going support is the means by which these individuals can reach their full potential and contribute to the community.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you again. I urge you to consider drafting legislation that addresses these recommendations.