

House Human Resources Appropriations Committee Testimony

Committee Chair Nelson and Members of the Committee, my name is Marissa Mahanna, Program Supervisor of Cooper House, Dacotah Foundation Fargo. I am writing this testimony in opposition to the budget cuts offered in HB 1012.

I have been employed at Cooper House, North Dakota's first permanent supportive housing program, prior to its opening in 2010. Over these past 10+ years, I have seen firsthand the effect that it has had on the lives of many previously homeless individuals. Cooper House has established a place of residency for those who have not been able to secure or maintain housing in the private sector due to criminal history; severe and persistent mental illness; and/or substance abuse. By eliminating the initial barrier to housing, tenants have been able to focus on the underlying issues and precipitating factors that initially lead to homelessness. Staff play a crucial role in the tenants' ability to maintain housing, work on addressing maladjusted behavior and promote their personal health and wellbeing.

I feel having 24 hour staffing in a building serving chronic homeless populations is essential to the safety and security of the tenants, their quality of life and the residential environment as a whole. Staff monitor the security for the tenants and the building, permit entrance to tenants who reside at Cooper, and document the tenants have been seen throughout the day. This process insures that all tenants are safe and accounted for, and gives a general knowledge of tenant capacity within the building in case of emergency such as fire, natural disaster, etc. Safety is also partially achieved by conducting contraband searches at the point of entrance. This eliminates possible weapons, illegal substances, and non-consumable forms of alcohol from being in the property. Cooper House is founded on the Harm Reduction Model. This model assists in decreasing the intensity, duration, and frequency of the usage of substances. Staff monitor and track consumable alcohols brought into the building based on a set policy that supports safer levels of consumption. This assists in reducing prospective bodily harm; less violence and or escalation of behaviors; use of dangerous mind altering substances; reduction in medical interventions; and maintaining a safer blood alcohol content for those that have not fully entered recovery. These interventions support the mission of utilizing less emergency services, supports harm reduction; and promotes tenant safety.

Staff also work as a gatekeeper of the building by monitoring access of visitors. This allows tenants to only receive visitors that they trust, keeps out individuals who have a history of violating the rules or criminal laws during prior visits, only allowing two visitors per tenant, and not allowing visitors to bring in alcohol outside of what is set policy for the tenant who resides at Cooper. These rules are all agreed upon at move in by the tenants with the objective to decrease noise disturbances and disorderly conduct. Also, many transient populations tend to double up or couch surf in standard housing which often results in eviction and unsafe circumstances. Staff being available onsite is necessary in eliminating potential housing violations that could result in eviction and continue the cycle of homelessness. Without staff, the building would not be regulated in this capacity and potential victimization of those who are vulnerable would have grave consequences.

Besides acting as the gatekeeper for the safety and security of the tenants, staff provide additional supports. The staff allocate and distribute donated food items to insure that tenants have access to minimal and appropriate nutrition. Staff work collaboratively with other entities in the community to promote residents well-being and address needs. They also safety plan with the tenants when needed to assist in the reduction of higher level of care and/or use of emergency services. Staff implement and facilitate psychosocial support activities in the form of recreational groups and individual informal life skills training. They assist in the form of mentoring, education, role playing, etc. Staff play an instrumental part in procurement of wrap around services, access to community based providers, and liaison to community supports.

Without having staffing 24 hours a day, the building would not function in a safe manner, would not be able to house its target population of the most vulnerable chronically homeless and would jeopardize the integrity of the program. Alcohol consumption would not be regulated, illegal substances or dangerous items could be brought into the building, there would no longer be screening or supervision of visitors thus allowing anyone in at any time. I would foresee that the usage of legal and illegal substances would rise without the presence of staff onsite full time. Additionally, criminal activity, violence, overdose, and death could be a result of lack of regulation, assessment, and intervention provided by staff. I am aware of some properties in downtown Fargo that serve similar populations as Cooper House, that struggle with these concerns. Oftentimes, due to lack of assertive skills or cognitive function, vulnerable populations are not able to protect their housing or their physical or mental wellbeing. It is well known that individuals, without the supportive housing, are preyed upon by others they have met in the homeless community. They use them for shelter and other needs or desires. Without staff, Cooper House tenants could potentially fall victim to the same type of exploitation.

Cooper House has created a supportive and compassionate environment for this specific disadvantaged population. I have seen the impact of how providing basic needs have created a space and opportunity to work towards achievement of psychological needs and self-actualization. This process is what creates self-reliant and productive citizens. Having staff monitor the safety and security of the Cooper House building and tenants is an indispensable component to protecting some of our states most vulnerable people.

Thank you for your time and consideration of our request.

Marissa Mahanna