

Testimony Prepared for the
House Human Services Committee

March 15, 2021

By: Kim Jacobson, Agassiz Valley Human Service Zone Director

RE: Senate Bill 2083 – Child Abuse and Neglect Changes

Chairman Weisz and members of the House Human Service Committee, my name is Kim Jacobson. I am the Agassiz Valley Human Service Zone Director, serving the service area of Traill and Steele Counties and a member of the North Dakota Social Service Director Association. Please consider my testimony in support of SB 2083.

North Dakota has been engaged various redesign efforts over the past three years. One of the key areas of redesign includes our child welfare system, including child protective services. It is through those efforts, our system has been examined, areas for improvement identified, and change implemented. The process of redesign allows us to take a birds-eye view of our programs examining how services can be better provided to ensure effectiveness, efficiency, and quality.

One example that has resulted from redesign effort is the implementation of the Safety Practice Model. This practice model structures the array of child welfare services - child protection, foster care and in-home services, uses similar terminology, definition, and vision. It aligns the various levels of intervention in a way that is mindful of the values and goals of the entire system. Necessary changes have been identified. Some changes can be addressed through policy and practice. Other changes are required in law. These changes are included in Senate Bill 2083.

From the local boots on the ground standpoint, these changes are necessary. The change from a “*services required*” system to a “*confirmed*” determination yields a much more

accurate representation. The term “*services required*” or “*no services required*” was often confusing to families and partners in the child welfare system. The proposed term change to “*confirmed*” or “*not confirmed*” does not change the intervention, but rather it communicates a clearer outcome message. Our goal remains to protect children and empower families. If there are risks to the family and child, our goal is to offer services and strategies to help mitigate safety risk and to strengthen families. Engagement is key to any type of intervention or change. Clearer definitions and language are key important for building an environment for engagement and support.

In addition, I am supportive of the changes proposed to institutional child abuse and neglect systems. There are opportunities for greater accountability and protective measures that can be supported under the institutional child abuse and neglect model. Under current law and practice, human service zones assess suspected child abuse/neglect reports related to both parent/caregiver and school-related concerns. The Department completes assessments of suspected child abuse/neglect reports related to institutional (non-school) concerns.

SB 2083 calls for the transition of school-related assessments to the Department. This would allow schools to be treated similarly to an institution and also better recognizes their duty as an employer. This is an important aspect of distinction from parent/caregiver-based reports. This proposed change is strongly and historically supported by Human Service Zone Directors.

The proposed change to remove reference of child protection team members is also supported. It removes outdated language and modernizes the law to support redesign system changes. While we are grateful for the role that child protection teams have held in the past, our redesigned system no longer utilizes this process as it was a barrier to timely determination and notification to the family and if applicable, juvenile court.

This concludes my testimony on SB 2083. I stand for questions from the committee.