

**Testimony In Support of Senate Bill 2089 with Amendments**  
**House Human Services Committee**  
**Representative Robin Weisz, Chairman**

March 3, 2021

Chairman Weisz and Members of the House Human Services Committee:

My name is Lorena Poppe. I am the owner and executive director of Poppy's Promise, a Bismarck-based provider of services to children and young adults diagnosed with autism. I am also a member of the ND Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Advocacy Coalition, whose goal is to help assure that autism services are not only available but accessible and responsive to the need that exists in our state. I am testifying today in support of Senate Bill 2089 with amendments.

In both of my roles, I am deeply concerned about language in Senate Bill 2089 that would drastically reduce the funding available for the ASD Voucher program from over \$1.3 million to just \$300,000 for the upcoming biennium. While it is true that money appropriated for the ASD Voucher program in prior sessions has not been fully spent, I can tell you as a provider of services this most certainly is not because there is little or no need for the Voucher program. Rather, I believe the lack of spending speaks to the confusing and complex process of applying for and accessing services and covered items. Families voice frustration in trying to understand and navigate the program without the support of a system navigator or case manager familiar with the processes and requirements. They have indicated the number of recommendation letters they need to seek out for various parts of the Voucher is daunting and confusing for both families and the professionals seeking to provide recommendations.

Mixed messages are often given to families and providers about what can and cannot be covered by the Voucher program. Many times, the restrictions placed on a particular component of the Voucher are so limiting that the service cannot be used to address the need present. An example of this is within the respite care service of the Voucher. Families can access respite care, but often not for reasons or at times that are significant

to the family, such as while parents are working or attending school. The Voucher program does not allow respite staff to provide transportation to children and teens receiving Voucher services, which limits the ability to support their involvement in community activities and social skill development.

Prior to the passage of the current form of SB 2089, the Department of Human Services proposed to eliminate the Voucher and roll funds designated for that program into the ASD Waiver program. While this could appear positive at first glance, a deeper look reveals that many kids eligible for the Voucher would fall through the cracks yet again due to the eligibility and age requirements for the Waiver program being significantly different from the Voucher. Eliminating this important program or slashing available funds is not the solution to getting needed supports and services to children and families. Providing support to families in navigating the ASD Voucher and a program structure that is understandable and functional are steps in the right direction.

I encourage this committee to support amendments to Senate Bill 2089's language regarding the ASD Voucher program that will provide for:

- System navigation for families
- Restoration of the approximate \$1,000,000 appropriation that has been removed
- Individualized person-centered planning that includes options for In-Home Supports, community activities and transportation
- Increase in the age limit to provide for supports during the transition to early adulthood

Our kids deserve to receive supports and services that will lead them to success throughout their lifetimes, and our families deserve the peace of mind an effective Voucher program can bring.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.