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On Behalf of Youthworks
Testimony on SB 2258
House Judiciary Committee

Chairman Weisz and Members of the Committee:

I testify today on behalf of Youthworks in favor of SB 2258. Youthworks is a private non-profit agency governed by a Board of Directors with more than 30 direct service professionals based in the two largest cities in North Dakota and serves the entire state. The mission of the agency is “Helping Homeless, Runaway, Trafficked, and Struggling Youth in North Dakota.” Since 1987, YW has been the statewide leader in educating community stakeholders about the struggles affecting runaway and homeless youth (“RHY”), in an effort to prevent and end youth homelessness. YW is in a unique position to meet the needs of North Dakota’s runaway, homeless, trafficked, and street youth due to the vast array of services provided, including many federally funded programs.

This session, Youthworks has supported several efforts to assist youth in being better able to access critical information they need to succeed and to empower those who do not have adequate familial or systemic support to ensure their health and safety. Last week, this committee heard one such effort to assist youth in accessing healthcare under certain circumstances when they are not able to secure the consent of their legal guardian. Additionally, Youthworks supported the initial version of SB 2258, which would have amended state law to allow youth to access vital records where they lack consent of a guardian. Rather than requiring legislative intervention, Youthworks and others were able to work with the Division of Vital Records to adjust their internal policies to achieve the necessary changes.

SB 2258 was therefore amended to provide for a study in addressing yet another critical gap in services for some youth, that being their ability to access safe shelter when they are unable to secure the consent of a legal guardian. One of the concerns raised by stakeholders is that organizations providing shelter care to runaway homeless youth are not currently licensed. Patricia Julianelle from SchoolHouse Connection will provide additional data to this committee which explains the need to ensure that homeless youth can access safe shelter. I or Mark Heinert are happy to answer any questions the committee may have as to why some North Dakota youth find themselves without a legal guardian to consent to shelter placement.

Through discussions with stakeholders, the first step in addressing this problem is taking a look at the necessity of licensing youth-serving shelters and looking at what the barriers are for youth in accessing such shelter. SB 2258 would provide for a study of these issues, so that we can ensure that youth-serving agencies are provided appropriate care by agencies that provide services consistent with best practices, and that barriers that prevent youth from accessing the safe shelter they need are removed as appropriate.

Youthworks therefore strongly urges a “do pass” recommendation on SB 2258.