

## **SB 2089/ ND Autism Spectrum Disorder Voucher**

### **Senate Human Services Committee**

**1/12/2021**

Chairwoman Senator Lee, Vice Chairwoman Senator Roers and Senate Human Services Committee

My name is Vicki Peterson, I am a Family Consultant for Family Voices of ND and I am also a parent of a young adult with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I am here today to testify on SB2089 and not in favor of repealing the section for the Autism Spectrum Disorder Voucher Program.

In the 2013-2014 ND Legislative Session, HB 1038 passed, and the Governor signed a bill to create an autism voucher program that ND advocates came together to bring forward. This program allows person with autism spectrum diagnosis to access funding for an array of services such as assistive technology, respite service, safety equipment, sensory items and more. Funding specifically needed for the families and persons with autism spectrum disorders. The eligibility requirements are to have an Autism Spectrum Diagnosis, children must be age 3 through age 17, and have a gross family income of up to 200%fpl (for a family of four that is \$4367.00 per/month). The persons who have access to this program typically are not accessing and or unable to be served under any other program except for possibly education services. If this program is to be removed, there will be a large gap for families who have their children qualified for this program and could have major family consequences.

A new CDC report ([\*U.S. Autism Rates Up 10 Percent in New CDC Report - 2020 - News Releases - News - Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School Public Health \(jhsph.edu\)\*](#)) 1 in 54 children are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, this is a 10% increase from 2016. The core deficits of ASD are:

- Social and Communication Impairments
- Limited Interests
- Repetitive Behaviors
- Increase chance of co-morbidities (mental health, chronic health conditions)
- Increase chance of elopement.
- Increase of Sensory Processing Issues

I would like to briefly describe 2 available funding services under the ND ASD Voucher Program that is not only beneficial but vital.

Respite Care. State money spent on relief for caregivers of children and youth with ASD goes a long way in keeping them mentally healthy. For the families, whose children have significant behaviors that do not have access to respite, there is an increase chance of psychiatric hospitalizations, entering the justice system, divorce of parents, failure in education system, loss of jobs for parents and more. We will be hearing through this legislative session on “keeping children and youth out of institutions”, and juvenile justice reform; so why would we eliminate a program that could help turn those situations around? In ND, we also have many grandparents raising children with ASD, the needed support the autism voucher provides is critical. A study was conducted that found 7% of children with ASD were hospitalized for psychiatric reasons in a single year (2019; *David Mandell, SCD*). His study examined the use of respite care for children with ASD and found that a \$1000 spent on respite services resulted in an 8% decrease of hospitalizations from 26, 000 children. Imagine the help of respite services could do for the families who have children and youth with ASD lead more productive lives? It is huge and a highly requested service from this program.

Next, I would like to speak briefly on Sensory Equipment and Safety. ASD diagnosis often includes sensory processing difficulties. Sensory processing issues can interfere with daily function and even isolate individuals and their families. Often sensory integration therapy can help with the overload exhibited for the child. ASD Voucher program was not created to pay for therapy, but many times there is high

recommendations of sensory equipment. This currently, if proven to be effective and to improve the child's behavior or adaptation to; could use the ASD voucher to get funding for such equipment. This can include weighted blankets, noise-blocking headphones, lap-pads plus the need for safety devices or equipment to keep the child from elopement. Standardized tests have been done that show children with sensory issues that had access to equipment or devices, had less dependence and assistance with caregivers in social and self-care areas (*Sensory Integration: Changing the Brain through Play, Amy Wheeland*). Safety equipment for prevention of a child with autism is necessary for many families but can be expensive and out of reach financially for many. A study (*Elopement and Autism IAN 2019*) found that nearly half of all children with autism spectrum disorder attempt to bolt or wander from a safe place. Many children wander or escape due to an overload of sensory stimulation. It is with great sadness that a child with autism who did wander, has passed in ND as well. Needed security and safety equipment for some families can mean between a life and death of a child. The ASD voucher program could help save a life in this instance.

I am requesting that you keep and do not repeal the fund for this vital program. Instead, I hope the funding for this program continues and that it will be used very effectively for the families who rely solely on this program for the things I have mentioned.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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