

Testimony
Senate Bill 2089 – Relating to the Repeal of Section 50-06-32.1 of
the North Dakota Century Code
Senate Human Services Committee
Senator Judy Lee, Chairwoman
January 12, 2021

Chairwoman Lee and Members of the Senate Human Services Committee:

I am Holly Johnson, Licensed Board Certified Behavior Analyst, and appointed Behavioral Specialist member of the Governor's Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Task Force. I live Minot, and through the end of 2020, was the founding Clinical Director for an Autism Service agency based out of Bismarck, delivering clinic-based applied behavior analysis. I've been working with children and families in the Autistic community in a variety of capacities for 15 years.

I am speaking today on behalf of a number of ASD Task Force members. While we were not able to have a formal meeting of all ASD Task Force, several members are opposed to the repeal of the Autism Spectrum Disorder Voucher Program under Section 2 of SB 2089. The goal of the ASD Voucher Program is to address the gaps in non-therapy related services and to provide education and support to families who may not qualify for other help.

Let me repeat that.

This program is to address the gaps in non-therapy related services and to provide education and support to families who may not qualify for other help.

The ASD Voucher Program allows for the purchase of assistive technology devices, registration for workshops or trainings for parents, tutoring, safety equipment, self-care equipment, or sensory equipment for families with income below 200% of the poverty guidelines. It also will help these struggling families pay for respite care of their Autistic child, giving the parent(s) temporary relief. Again, respite care to a parent who may not qualify for other help.

While eligibility for other autism specific program may exist for these families, barriers to accessing those other programs will make it problematic for these children to get supports they need, especially in regards to assistive devices or sensory items. If these children qualify under the DD waiver, that program does not allow the purchase of assistive technology devices. The most notable Assistive Technology includes iPads with special Assistive & Alternative Communication (AAC) applications for communication, which has been hugely instrumental for Autistic children who are non-verbal, or lack the ability to communicate in a functional way.

In my previous testimony this morning, you heard about the difficulties with ABA workforce in ND. Waitlists for children to receive ABA can be a solid year, if not longer. This wait for services causes a further gap in skills, putting these children even further behind, and having a program like the ASD Voucher can help families relatively quickly, based on approval of their application. This program was created to fill non-therapy related gaps. Repealing NDCC 50-06-32.1 will now mean these families will have to compete for slots on the ASD Waiver; which, at the October 2020 ASD Task Force meeting, had 65 children on the waitlist.

In summary, myself, and a number of ASD Task Force members, strongly oppose the repeal in Section 2 of SB 2089 of NDCC 50-06-32.1. I hope you hear (or have heard) testimony from parents of Autistic children who will be directly impacted should the ASD Voucher Program be repealed, because they are the families who will suffer more and progressively struggle with supporting their Autistic child.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this testimony. If I can be of assistance during this time of deliberation, please contact me at holly.johnson.bcba@outlook.com. This concludes my testimony.

Sincerely,

Holly Johnson, MS, BCBA, LBA
Board Certified Behavior Analyst #1-14-15198
ND Licensed Behavior Analyst #L15

All opinion expressed here is my own. These opinions in no way represent the Department of Human Services or the Life Skills and Transition Center, the entire membership of the Governor's Autism Spectrum Disorder Task Force, or Poppy's Promise, LLC, all of which I am actively involved with, adding to my unique perspective contained in this testimony. This testimony has been provided on my personal time.