

Senate Human Services Committee
Senate Bill No. 2089
January 12, 2021
Red River Room
Honorable Judy Lee, Chair

Chairman Lee and Members of the Committee, my name is Christine Hogan. I am an attorney for the Protection and Advocacy Project [P&A]. The Protection & Advocacy Project is an independent state agency whose mission is to advocate for the disability-related rights of persons with disabilities. We also act to protect persons with disabilities from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Much of our work involving children with disabilities involve supporting the individual needs and rights of children with autism.

While we are not opposed to the concept of administering funds for making direct cash payments set forth in Section 1 of the bill, we oppose the repeal of section 50-06-32.1 of the North Dakota Century Code. In other words, we oppose the repeal of the autism voucher program, which was established in 2014, after several years of research, study, debate, and advocacy work on the part of autism specialists as well as disability advocacy groups across the state. These individuals and groups worked tirelessly to find the best way to improve the quality of services and care to address the many essential services for children and adults with autism spectrum disorders that are not covered by insurance nor provided in school. Ultimately, the Legislature determined that the autism voucher system would provide the most effective mechanism for delivery of funds for these essential services for individuals with qualifying financial needs.

The repeal of the autism voucher program would be a severe blow to the progress that has been made in the field of autism treatment and to the hopes of the families for whom the program has provided critical assistance for such things as educational materials, sensory equipment, visual aids, safety equipment, assistive technology, and speech-generating devices. Without the voucher program, low income families would be unable to access these materials and equipment through other programs, insurance, or school. This equipment would have to be purchased by the family.

While we believe that the autism voucher program should not be repealed at all, we also know that a compromise is better than no funding at all. We therefore ask the committee to review the spending history of the voucher funds and then devise a compromise solution that would preserve the essential funding for this vitally important program.

We ask that you carefully review the actual expenditures under the autism program and maintain a sufficient level of funding for this program so that it may continue to serve those for whom it is intended to cover. We ask you to strike the repeal of section 50-06-32.1 NDCC and continue to discuss and scrutinize an appropriate level of funding for the autism voucher program. Thank you for your interest in this important issue.