

SB 2258 – Relating to access to birth records
SUPPORT

Hearing of the Senate Human Services Committee, January 26, 2021
Testimony of Patricia Julianelle, SchoolHouse Connection

SchoolHouse Connection is a national non-profit organization dedicated to overcoming homelessness through education and responding to the needs of students experiencing homelessness on a federal, state, and local level. We are experts in the public policies necessary to help youth experiencing homelessness access safe and appropriate services, graduate from high school and college, and find stable housing to end their homelessness permanently. This year alone, we are active partners on legislation in 13 states. We do this work with the spirit of permanently interrupting homelessness and achieving stability for the generations of families it impacts.

SchoolHouse Connection strongly supports the enactment of SB 2258, which would make it easier for people experiencing homelessness to access their own birth records. Homeless youth and parents often need basic vital documents like a birth certificate to access employment, education, health, housing, and other needed services. A birth certificate can open the door to the stability a person needs to end their homelessness for good. Without this document, people can be shut out of jobs, school, housing and health care, and can be forced into a cycle that makes their homelessness continue.

People experiencing homelessness usually lose important documents when they are homeless. They may be evicted, robbed, or simply unable to keep documents. A simple task like proving their identity so they can get a birth certificate can become impossible. The current process to get a birth certificate in North Dakota leads to a catch-22 for many people experiencing homelessness: they need a birth certificate to get an ID, and an ID to get a birth certificate. SB 2258 will eliminate this problem while adequately protecting against identity theft.

SB 2258 would eliminate barriers to birth certificates by allowing people experiencing homelessness to get a birth certificate with only one form of ID (that can include a letter from a service provider). The proof of identity the bill allows adequately protects against identity theft, while creating a mechanism that will allow people experiencing homelessness to get their own birth certificates. By ensuring there is no notary requirement, the bill also eliminates another barrier that is outdated and unnecessary, and particularly burdensome during a pandemic.

SB 2258 also allows unaccompanied homeless youth under 18 to get their own birth certificate. Unaccompanied homeless youth lack stable housing and are not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. Unaccompanied homeless youth have no parental support to meet their most basic needs, including shelter, health care, food, and clothing. These young people are homeless on their own for various reasons,

primarily related to poverty and family instability/dysfunction, and are striving to survive in unsafe or unstable environments. The federal McKinney-Vento Act requires all public schools to identify, enroll, and serve these young students. North Dakota's public schools identified 285 unaccompanied homeless youth in the 2018-2019 school year.¹

Currently, ND law allows vital records to be issued to individuals who are at least sixteen years old.² SB 2258 would ensure that unaccompanied youth who may be under sixteen years old can access their birth certificates, and that they can do so with one form of ID, like other people experiencing homelessness. This will eliminate a major barrier for youth who need a birth certificate to access education, employment, shelter, or other services. Better access to birth certificates will help homeless youth access basic services and benefits, keeping them safer and healthier, which will empower them to access education and employment that can end their homelessness. When youth experiencing homelessness cannot receive services, we, as a community, lose the opportunity to keep them safe, help end their homelessness, and support their families.

For these reasons, SchoolHouse Connection strongly urges the committee to pass SB 2258. I am happy to respond to any questions or concerns.

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¹ National Center for Homeless Education (2021).
<http://profiles.nche.seiservices.com/StateProfile.aspx?StateID=34>.

² See <https://www.health.nd.gov/vital/certified-copies-birth-records/birth-records-mail>.