

TESTIMONY HB 2215
House Appropriations - Human Services Committee
March 8, 2023

Good morning Mr. Chairman, Robin Weisz and members of the House of Human Services Committee. My name is Phyllis Briss, and I am the Program Director of the Activity Center, a program of Red River Human Services Foundation in Fargo, ND. Our agency supports people with developmental disabilities in Residential, Day and Social programs. The focus of my testimony today is related to the latter- Social programs.

I am here today to ask you for support of Senate Bill 2215 that partially supports two providers in the state who continue to lose funds every year. The only two Developmental Disability (DD) providers who offer recreational opportunities are Red River Human Services Foundation (RRHSF) in Fargo and LISTEN in Grand Forks. RRHSF operates the Activity Center. The Activity Center was opened in the early 1970's by Lutheran Social Services in order to fill a gap by offering social and leisure services that other DD providers were unable to provide. We serve 400 people with disabilities from the Fargo-Moorhead and surrounding areas. It is a safe place where they can go to meet new friends, join in recreational activities and receive services that give them a better quality of life. I have worked with this program for 36 years and have seen where our traditional services come up short and are not always able to give people the choices they need or want. This is where programs such as the Activity Center in Fargo and the LISTEN Center in Grand Forks play a vital role.

The Activity Center adds meaning to peoples' lives. It is a welcoming place where people come together to learn and develop social skill, friendships and how to access the community. It also acts as a safety net when other support systems have failed. For example, many winters ago, a senior member of the Activity Center called and said she was very sick. She did not have a provider she could call, and had no family. She felt she needed to go to the clinic, but was out of money for a cab, food, and paper supplies. Staff from the Activity Center took her into the emergency room where she received medication. They also brought her food and paper supplies to last until her social security check came. They continued to check on her until she was past the worst of her illness. Given this person's age, it was quite possible that they saved her life.

Daily activities may include sporting and community events, card games, cooking classes and weekly ceramic classes. We also provide special opportunities that most would not be able to do on their own such as camping, a trip to the Minnesota Twins game and the opportunity to participate in a yearly Christmas play. These activities add meaning to peoples' lives by getting them involved, rather than sitting in a group home that is not adequately staffed. We have 7 group homes in Fargo/West Fargo for a total of 35 people. Each home usually has 1-2 Direct Support Professionals (DSP's) in the evenings and it's not possible for the staff to take one person to the park, drop them off, take another person to a movie and work with 3 people at home at the same time. This again is where the Activity Center fills a void for DD providers who are short-staffed.

The story of the Activity Center and LISTEN Center is a long and winding road due to funding constraints. The Activity Center has nearly closed many times, such as when Lutheran Social Services of ND ran the program and many times almost eliminated it because of the financial drain. The Activity Center was picked up by Red River Human Services Foundation in 2001 and currently we lose \$80,000-\$100,000 per year operating it. We operated without state funds until 2013, when the Legislature approved \$150,000 per biennium for the two DD providers, or \$37,500 per year per provider. This is why I am asking for

your support to increase the funding by \$150,000 per biennium, which will give the two providers \$75,000 per year. I would also really appreciate if you could add an annual inflationary increase to Bill 2215 to help us with annual inflationary increases. Please support the Activity Center and the LISTEN Center by increasing the total biennial funding from \$150,000 per biennium. This is a small amount compared to many other requests you receive, but it will keep us up and running our programs to support people with disabilities immensely. Again, an inflationary increase would be very helpful too. Thank you and I will be happy to answer any questions.