

Testimony Prepared for the
Senate Human Services Committee

February 20, 2023

By: Kim Jacobson, Agassiz Valley Human Service Zone Director

Engrossed HB 1043:

**Relating Licensing and Admissions Criteria for Psychiatric
Residential Treatment Facilities**

Chair Lee and members of the Senate Human Services Committee, my name is Kim Jacobson and I serve as the Director of the Agassiz Valley Human Service Zone. I am here today to provide testimony in support House Bill 1043 that would modify licensing and admissions criteria for admissions to Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (PRTF).

Human Service Zones provide services to the most vulnerable citizens of all ages in our communities. A significant portion of the mandated services we provide are to children and families, focusing on child safety, permanency and well-being. Additionally, when youth are in foster care, Human Service Zone Directors serve as the legal custodian for those children and part of custodial and case management duties include securing the most appropriate placement for the children we are entrusted to serve and protect.

Human Service Zones are charged with coordinating and providing services to children who have been victims of abuse, neglect, as well as those who are exhibiting disruptive behaviors such as truancy and running away. Many of these youth have experienced trauma, but do not currently have the skills or supports to address and overcome the emotional struggles that accompany grief, loss and traumatic events present in their lives.

In our highly rural state, accessing mental health services typically involves travel to one of the larger communities throughout the state. However, even in our larger communities, waiting lists for adolescent psychiatry and therapy services are commonplace. Frequently, the moment when those services are needed most, they are not readily available. This leaves families, foster parents, and legal custodians to triage mental health needs, and often results in multiple placement disruptions, emergency room visits, short term shelter placements, and possibly psychiatric hospitalizations—if there is a bed available. This only compounds and exacerbates existing mental health needs, and puts our youth at increased risk of serious harm to themselves or others.

Youth experiencing emergent mental health crises in a community setting are frequently needing to utilize local emergency response services, including law enforcement, ambulance and emergency room visits attempting to mitigate risk of self-harm and to stabilize the crisis. HB 1043 calls for the expansion the definition of “serious risk of harm” for admission into a Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility will expedite critical, potentially life-saving access to mental health services to North Dakota’s youth. This change would be extremely beneficial to human services zones and the children and families we serve.

Please accept my testimony in support of House Bill 1043. I would appreciate your support of this important bill.