

**HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS
EDUCATION AND ENVIRONMENT DIVISION
REPRESENTATIVE MIKE NATHE, CHAIR
MARCH 6, 2025**

Chairman Nathe and members of the Committee, our names are Josh Selle and Kayla Sjoberg, together we form the Behavioral Health team within the Bismarck Office of North Dakota Parole, Probation and Pretrial Services, a division of the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (DOCR). The Parole, Probation and Pretrial Services Division is responsible for delivering correctional supervision to over seven thousand adults serving their sentences on parole granted by the authority of the North Dakota Parole Board, sentenced to supervised by probation or ordered to pretrial supervision by district courts, and transferred to North Dakota via the Interstate Compact for Adult Offender Supervision. We stand before you today to provide testimony in support of Senate Bill 2002, specifically the appropriation for specialized court dockets.

We would like to speak from the view of a front-line worker. Although we have not worked directly with a specialized treatment court, we have assisted our Drug Court probation officer on numerous occasions and have witnessed firsthand the significant impact that treatment courts have on their clients. While recidivism still occurs within Drug Court, it is substantially lower compared to a traditional caseload. We believe this is directly attributable to the structure and collaborative approach of treatment courts. When all stakeholders—including the judge, treatment providers, probation officers, and both state and defense attorneys—work together, the outcomes are far more effective. Clients benefit from direct, face-to-face interactions with all parties involved in their case,

receiving immediate positive reinforcement or sanctions based on their progress or actions.

A specialized mental health court would function in much the same way. Currently, we are required to meet with clients once a month, but we make a concerted effort to see most of them more frequently. Many struggle with medication management, remembering appointments, and even physically attending them. Additionally, a significant portion of this population is homeless and lacks access to a phone, making consistent communication a challenge.

On many occasions, we have driven around town searching for clients who frequently move and have no means of informing us of their whereabouts. Even when they do have a phone, some remain unaware that they even are on probation for extended periods due to their mental health. A monthly check-in is often insufficient, as a great deal can go wrong in that time. For this reason, we prioritize frequent contact to ensure they receive the necessary support.

We have personally handled cases in which individuals have committed offenses while experiencing a mental health crisis. However, with additional support and proper medication management, these individuals have been able to turn their lives around—securing housing, obtaining employment, and becoming productive members of society.

A dedicated mental health court docket would provide the opportunity for weekly face-to-face meetings, along with comprehensive support services integrated within the court system. This structure would allow for timely interventions when challenges arise, ensuring that all stakeholders remain aligned in their approach. Consistency is essential

when working with individuals who have behavioral health needs, and this type of treatment court would provide the stability required for effective case management.

We firmly believe that establishing a mental health court would be highly beneficial for individuals struggling with mental illness. Not only would it provide them with the necessary support and oversight, but it would also help reduce their involvement in the traditional court system and jails—environments that are often ill-equipped to address their needs. Ultimately, this approach would lead to improved outcomes for both clients and the justice system as a whole.