



March 20, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairman Monson and Members of the House Appropriations Government Operations Division,

My name is Jena Gullo. I am the Executive Director of the Missouri Slope Areawide United Way based in Bismarck. I come to you begging on behalf of the poor in support of Senate Bill 2014. Your decision may mean the future of quality services provided at our Center for Opportunity, but more importantly, the future of hundreds of people experiencing homelessness in our state. During severe weather like we have experienced this winter, with a windchill of -65, and most every winter, having proper funding to keep our doors open is a matter of life or death.

Our United Way volunteered to start an emergency homeless shelter in Bismarck at the start of the winter of 2017 when a major homeless provider in our area, the Ruth Meiers Hospitality House, abruptly shut their doors.

In 2019, United Way purchased property in Bismarck with Community Works of North Dakota. We continued to provide shelter, raise funds, and then built and opened a permanent 24/7 shelter for men, women, and families in 2023. Located at 1140 S 12<sup>th</sup> Street in Bismarck, we call our shelter the "Center for Opportunity," as we strive to give people hope and resources to get OUT of homelessness. We have 42 beds and will be adding an additional 18 beds for families. We offer laundry facilities and detergent, showers and hygiene supplies, computers with Wi-Fi, a private space for families with children, and private offices for local agencies and healthcare professionals.

We serve between 80-100 people each day and night, which is double the number from two years ago. The highest number of people per night was 144 individuals during a major snowstorm.

United Way provided 14,310 nights of shelter to 338 different clients during half of this past year, from July 2024 through December 2024. More than 80% are from North Dakota, with many coming to Bismarck from the surrounding rural communities and the western part of the state.

We are a substance-free shelter and help many people who are in recovery, many with mental health diagnoses and traumatic brain injuries, many who come to us straight from the state penitentiary, and many families with small children. We often bend our substance-free rules during extreme weather conditions, as there is literally nowhere else for the homeless to go.

We have coordinated 35+ agencies to regularly provide onsite services at our Center for Opportunity to remove barriers many of the homeless face, such as transportation, access to financial supports, vital documents needed to gain housing and employment, resume building, job coaching, parenting classes, and sober housing and case management. Addiction and mental health counselors from West Central Human Services come onsite. Public Health offers nutrition classes and diabetes management. The YMCA offers onsite child watch to allow parents time for job interviews.

Volunteers from local banks offer financial literacy classes. When school is out, children have had somewhere safe and warm to be. That was until March 3<sup>rd</sup> of this year, when we closed our doors during the daytime hours and now only provide overnight shelter due to lack of funds.

United Way receives \$138,000 from the North Dakota Homeless Grant. That helps to cover under 2.5 months of operations. COVID-19 funds and private fundraising helped to keep our doors open 24/7 thus far. We don't have sufficient operational funds to continue along this path.

What does this mean for our state?

- Our lack of funding for proper staffing levels affects our data collection ability and data collection quality for the state, which can, in turn, affect the state's federal funding from HUD.
- Being open during the daytime is critical for people experiencing homelessness to access the vital services needed to get out of homelessness.
- While it can be difficult to prove the cost-savings of incidents our shelter prevents, we know that major life-threatening incidents took place with law enforcement as soon as four days after we closed during the daytime.
- **With proper funding, 80% of the homeless we served did not return to homelessness.**
- Most importantly, our lack of funding affects our ability to stay open during the daytime, which can be life-saving.

It is vital that our capital city has a warm and safe place for the most vulnerable in our community to seek refuge during the winter months. With adequate funding, we are capable of creating pathways out of poverty that help people OUT of homelessness and help them to STAY out of homelessness.

Thank you for your time, support, and stewardship. Please do not hesitate to reach out should you have any questions or would like a tour.

My very best,  
Jena M. Gullo

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