

**Testimony – Interim Human Services Committee
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Good Morning, Chairman Damschen and members of the Human Services committee. My name is Theresa Will and I am the Director at City-County Health District (CCHD) in Valley City. Our agency provides public health services for the citizens of Barnes County.

A group of approximately 30 local citizens, representing all sectors of our community, recently reviewed numerous sources of data and statistics and brought in personal/facility experience to develop our Community Health Assessment. Three very strong issues rose to the top of our list of priorities. 1. Chronic Disease Prevention, 2. Violence Prevention and 3. Mental Health Services access.

I am here today primarily to discuss #3, “mental health access” but as I know you are all aware, our 2nd priority area, violence prevention, is also strongly intertwined with mental health access.

According to the CDC, about 25% of all U.S. adults have a mental illness but what’s worse is that nearly 50% of U.S. adults will develop at least one mental illness during their lifetime.

A recent article in the Fargo Forum stated that the people of North Dakota have more opportunity to get drunk in bars than any other state in the country, with a bar for every 1,621 people. We have created plenty of access for alcohol intake but do not have sufficient access for treatment for drug and alcohol addictions as well as for other mental health issues.

A severe shortage of Licensed Addiction Counselors (LAC’s) has been evident for quite some time in the 9-county area served by The South Central Human Services Center (SCHSC), which includes Barnes County. At an April Advisory Council meeting, I learned three startling facts:

- a) That SCHSC was 3 LAC’s short;
- b) That there were 18 open LAC positions in the state; and
- c) That 78% of the current LAC’s are over age 50.

In addition, I recently learned that our Human Service Center is currently not even licensed to provide LAC services. When I asked about this, I was told that due to the shortage of providers, they were not able to meet documentation requirements so the license was temporarily pulled until December 23, 2013. Obviously, this has made the access issue even greater.

These are alarming data on the lack of help and treatment available for people suffering with chemical dependency and mental illnesses. Given the high prevalence of mental illness in our population, we are very concerned about this shortage, as well as the shortage of other mental health providers in our area.

One of our local physicians sent me an email recently, voicing her frustration and concern. She had called SCHSC for an appointment for a patient with depression. The earliest appointment to see a therapist was 3 weeks out, and for a psychiatry visit was 2 months out. We realize SCHSC is doing the best that they can with the funding and staffing that they are currently allotted, but it is not enough. Often, we need to take advantage of a short window of opportunity where these clients are willing to seek treatment.

Currently there are zero LAC's in Valley City; formerly there was 1 private counselor and weekly service to Valley City from SCHSC.

Getting from Valley City to Jamestown (45 minutes away) is a great concern for many who need help. A car requires a certain level of income and also a valid driver's license, both often difficult issues with people with chemical dependency (CD). The senior citizen bus can take clients to appointments but then folks are asked to stay in Jamestown for most of the day while other patient(s) on the same bus receive dialysis. For a young mother with small children or someone who is taking time off work, this is not feasible. For very "special" cases an extra bus might be available, but this strains the Senior Citizen budget. SCHSC is the only realistic service option for many of our clients who are low income, and

often un-insured.

Prairie St. John's, a for-profit psychiatric facility in Fargo, 60 miles away, offers 24/7 free assessment for inpatient treatment but has no outpatient treatment in Valley City. This was requested and declined earlier this fall. A one hour appointment in Fargo would require at least 3 hours of time off from a job.

Currently no-one provides dual diagnosis (psychiatric and CD) treatment in Valley City. We do have 4 Master's level counselors, private insurance may or may not pay and they are not able to provide services on a sliding scale so costs are often self-pay. There is 1 Sanford PhD psychologist whose services are usually covered by insurance but no breaks for people with low income or no insurance.

I have a prime example regarding a system that is not working right in my own office. One of my co-workers has a 20-year-old son who has significant chemical dependency issues, has been in trouble legally and has recently been court-ordered to receive treatment. He does not have a car, but even if he did, there are no services available in Valley City or Jamestown at this time. His mother states, "I'm surprised that he is still alive at this point. Now that treatment has been court-ordered, he should be getting services that can potentially save his life, but he won't. The court will excuse his not following through because he will say he wasn't able to get there. He will continue without treatment this way but would be forced to have treatment if only it were available in Valley City." This young man does have a supportive family with insurance and the means to get him to appointments, but he will not make that effort on his own.

Valley City Police calls are just the tip of the iceberg, but 2012 and 2013 show a doubling of calls for drugs and narcotic violations. Valley City is home to not only methamphetamine and prescription drug abuse, but also heroin abuse. Alcohol-related offenses are also increasing. What is the real-life downgrading of our community standard of living as a result of all this? What is the economic

cost in policing and lost wages? What are the medical costs for CD related incidents? What costs does society pay in lost productive citizens, and increased crime? What are the costs that CD brings to individuals and families in raw suffering?

Our community, our co-workers, our friends and our families need to have access to mental health services in a timely manner. The current system is failing. I ask that you look closely at this during the interim and assist in developing solutions in the near future.

I appreciate your taking the time to listen to some of the Valley City/Barnes County mental health access concerns. I believe these concerns are not very different from those you can hear about across the state.