

## Testimony

### Human Services Interim Committee

Tuesday, October 29, 2013

Good afternoon Chairman Damschen and members of the Committee. My name is Jennifer Buresh, I live in Dickinson, ND. I sustained a traumatic brain injury due to domestic abuse and violence. I am not sure the exact date of my attack and never will be, however it has been narrowed down to either June 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> of 2009. After I was beaten, I started violently throwing up. I could not remember anything at all. My entire memory was gone; all 38 years of my life were gone. All time, space and existence stopped. My life, as I knew it, ceased to exist. I could not walk, I could not get dressed, I was seeing with triple vision and I could not make coherent sentences. The abuse continued and got worse. I had only two options, either drive 5 hours through the mountains of Montana by myself to get to the doctor or drive 5 hours to Dickinson to be near family to get help.

As time went on, I saw a neurologist and I am not sure how that happened. It was through the doctor that I got orders to see a speech therapist. In September of 2009, I was supposed to do therapy 5 days a week, but because my ex-husband didn't believe I had a brain injury that was not going to happen. My ex-spouse made my life and death decisions, therefore, I was not able to follow the doctor's orders and get the therapy I so desperately needed. The abuse at that point, increased. My situation became a multifaceted nightmare; he made it a physical, emotional, mental and financial nightmare. I was able to start my therapy in a very limited capacity on September of 2009, but it was very inconsistent at that point. I did speech and occupational therapy to

get some sort of therapy for my brain. I endured what I could, mostly just to appease my husband at the time until I was physically strong enough to leave my abusive situation. May 2010 was when I was finally physically strong enough to leave my abusive spouse. From September 2009 to January 2011, I did therapy to retrain my brain and I was at about a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade level. My son was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at this time and we were doing the same kind of homework.

My speech therapist described my brain injury to me in this way; the damage to my brain was as if I had a major car accident along with shaken baby syndrome combined.

It was about March or April of 2010, when I saw my medical doctor that I had a memory and a cognitive realization of what had taken place with sustaining the TBI. My doctor went through everything with me about what really happened and told me that it was a miracle that I was alive and there. That is when I began to really grasp everything.

I came back to Dickinson to be with my family and I didn't know where to start and how to get help. I needed help with everything in my life. No one here in Dickinson wanted to or would help me with anything regarding my traumatic brain injury. My medical professionals all told me that they could help me to a point, but that I needed to seek alternative ways of treatment, body, mind and spirit. I was left on my own to figure this out. Thankfully, I have knowledge and background in healing therapies and I know people that saved me in my hour of need. I needed more. I could not work, I had no income, I was told that I would never work again, I was originally told that I may never get my sight back. The doctors were confident about my speech coming back

and that I would be able to walk again. They were not confident that my life skills would come back, but I was able to regain those functions.

When I saw no one wanted to help me, I mean no one. Not my friends, not the service agencies, not my family. I could get the basics, like the county social service agency knew my son and I needed food stamps, so I did get that, but there was nothing else. My social service case worker knows that I have trouble with my memory, so I forget dates and miss deadlines. The case worker should know how to work with people with memory issues. At times I have been taken advantage of because of my short term memory issues. I have requested a new case worker twice and I have never received one. My ex-husband and I are supposed to draw up plans 30 days ahead of time, but I don't remember those dates and things change, so instead of helping me work through this together and help me, I am without benefits for that month, because I was unable to navigate the system. There is no flexibility, there are no exceptions, if you don't follow their criteria then there are no benefits.

I have gone through the revolving door of many many agencies. The agencies in Dickinson are satellite agencies and they send me here and there and shuffle me around and around and they all say they have never worked with anyone with a brain injury. No one was able to help me, I am left on my own to try and find help. The other thing I am told by agency workers is that "well, you look fine", so why should we help you. I need services; I need help in coordinating all the aspects of my life. I have tried telling people what I need and they have failed me over and over again.

The purpose of my testimony here today is to attest to the need for a comprehensive system of care for brain injury survivors in the state of

North Dakota. People with brain injuries are not able to speak for themselves. Those of us with brain injuries have a hard time coordinating our schedules. We forget to make appointments and if we make them, we forget to go to them. I suffer from mental fatigue as well.

I have been totally abandoned by society. Living with a brain injury is isolating – I am the person that was forgotten. When I was at the agency asking for assistance, I got nothing. I reached out in the only way that I knew how and not one single person has been there to help me. People made a conscious choice not to listen and not to help me.

Some of the services that I could have benefited from were programs through Social Services, Protection and Advocacy, Domestic Abuse and Rape Crisis Center as well as the Dakota Center for Independent Living, Community Options and Vocational Rehabilitation. The agencies in Dickinson do not know how to deal with a person with a brain injury, including the Dickinson police force. If this can be so easily done to me then we know that it can just as easily be done to one of your family members. Unless you have someone who can speak out for you on your behalf or make sure that you are being treated fairly, you are left to fall through the cracks of all the agencies.

If I could have someone to manage my case, it would help with the overwhelming feeling of trying to manage life over all. My appointments could be coordinated, my activities, my schedule, I need help managing all my medications. It is hard for me to coordinate my daily schedule. Scheduling is a big monster for me. I am working 3 days a week on a part time basis, I have my minor son every other weekend, I try to find time for myself and get the rest that I need. Also with

scheduling there are my appointments that need to be coordinated. Looking forward and back is difficult for me. I would like to have a social life, but I am too exhausted and overwhelmed with life. Making sure I get to my son's school activities is also something that I need to schedule.

After receiving the blunt force trauma to my head my husband left me there with no remorse and he was not the least bit concerned for me. Part of my problem is that I don't remember everything, but I remember watching him and I remember how I felt. I want to tell my story so that you realize the impact that a brain injury can have on an individual. My husband's actions were that it was just a normal day and nothing ever took place. I have lost complete control of my life and I am just left to ride the wave of the unknown. I know that there is a God and that is what I had to draw from, because I had no other support. Of everything that was wiped out in my memory, I still knew that there was a God.

Thank you for listening and to my testimony. If you have any questions, I will do my best to answer them for you.