

Human Services Committee

October 8, 2014

Good morning Chairman Damschen and members of the Interim Human Services Committee. I am Pete Silbernagel, State Representative, from District 22. I am representing the Steering Committee for the Behavioral Health Stakeholder's Group. This Stakeholder's Group worked collaboratively and in support of Renee Schulte as she developed her final report on "Behavioral Health Planning" for our state.

The Schulte Report and the supporting Stakeholder's Document clearly articulate the behavioral health issues that exist in North Dakota. These issues are real and pose a significant risk to the behavioral health environment to our citizens, law enforcement, the courts, our schools, correctional system, key state agencies and others. The Schulte report states, "The North Dakota mental health and substance abuse system is in a crisis".

Another perspective is that of Mr. Colby Braun, Warden at the North Dakota State Penitentiary, who recently stated, "We have become the largest mental health facility in the state. Is this our long-term plan for the state? We have very qualified staff that does a great job working with this population, but do we want to wait for the mentally ill people to commit a crime before we treat them?"

Recently the North Dakota oil and Gas Industry Impacts Study was completed and this study also speaks to the social impacts occurring in North Dakota and the growing need to strengthen our health systems. Kadrmas, Lee and Jackson conducted this study and their CEO, Niles Hushka has stated that, "Mental health is a very significant concern. We are predicting significant increases in employment and therefore population. We need associated increases in all social infrastructures especially health care."

The challenges that we face with the behavioral health system in our state did not occur overnight, nor will the solutions be able to be accomplished immediately.

On the surface, the task ahead may look daunting, but with a systematic and consistent effort, we can address the issues over a period of time. Some of the solutions will require legislative actions, some will only require collaboration among key stakeholders, and other solutions may be accomplished administratively. Already we have seen examples of progress among stakeholders and administrative remedies.

In developing the Schulte Report and the Stakeholders Report over 400 individuals participated in the process. Behavioral Health stakeholders representing all areas came together voluntarily to find the solutions that will work for our state. I have heard from long standing leaders in the field, that to this extent, this has never happened before in our state. The stakeholders are energized, and I believe, committed to implementing solutions for all North Dakota citizens.

The Schulte Report, along with the supportive Stakeholder's Report, provides an excellent road map to chart a successful course in creating a behavioral health system that could be the envy of other states. As in so many other areas, "The North Dakota Way" in the behavioral health arena, could become a model for other states. We have the financial ability to accomplish this, but as importantly, we have an energized and committed base of behavioral health stakeholders to insure the success of this effort.

The bill drafts that you have discussed today are recommendations from both reports. They will address issues related to access and service shortages, help to expand the work force, address agency structures for the future, improve communications and establish data collection and research to monitor progress of the changes made and determine evidence-based performance. These draft bills are a significant "first step" in implementing the legislative actions required to build a "world class" behavioral health system within our state. The draft measures in front of you today are not a "fix-all" solution to all of our issues, but they are a great start. The Stakeholder's Steering Committee fully supports these bills and encourages this committee to approve them and bring them to the 64th Legislative Assembly.

Mr. Chairman and Committee members, thank you for your time today and thank you for studying this significant issue during the interim. I or other members of the Steering Committee would be happy to try to answer any questions that you might have.