

Testimony
Human Services Interim Committee
Representative Kathy Hogan, Chair
January 6, 2016

Chairman Hogan, and members of the Human Services Interim Committee, I am Jim Vetter, Vice President of Partner and Community Relations for Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch (DBGK). I am here today to provide an overview of the system of residential services to youth in North Dakota as well as the current strengths and challenges to this system.

North Dakota has two main levels of residential services that are licensed by the Department of Human Services (DHS). There are Residential Child Care Facilities (RCCF) and Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (PRTF) throughout the state. The RCCF level is commonly called group home care and is licensed by the Children and Family Services division. Youth in these programs are foster care youth that require out of home placement for a period of time based on their treatment and behavioral needs. Youth stay an average of seven months and then transition to their home community—some back to their homes and others to individual foster homes.

The PRTF level of care is commonly called psychiatric care and is licensed by the Behavioral Health Division. PRTF has an initial and ongoing certificate of need (CON) process that requires the youth's psychiatric treatment to be deemed medically necessary. Treatment plans are developed and refined based on the individual treatment needs. Length of stay averages five months. Youth generally transition to a lower level of care or home, with community supports in place.

Both levels of residential services are necessary when community and family resources have been expended. Placement may give the family and community a chance to take a breath and review what has and has not been working. Treatment staff from the facility work with the child, family, and community to develop a treatment plan. Staff at the facilities advocate for the youth and their families, and help them navigate the system—a system that can be very complex. Residential facilities provide an environment for youth to build on their strengths which enables them to have a positive transition back to their communities.

Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch provides exceptional and innovative, trauma-informed care to youth and families in an environment that is safe and supportive. The children we see at the Ranch, and those seen at other North

Dakota facilities, are not bad kids. In most cases, bad things have happened to them. Trauma-informed care means we ask, “What happened to you?” rather than asking the old question of “What is wrong with you?” This change in how we think about the children in our care is huge. It changes everything and allows us to treat the children and their families with the compassion they need, and the respect many of them have never received.

Today’s residential system has many strengths and also faces some serious challenges. The list below includes input from myself and my peers at other agencies.

Some strengths of North Dakota’s system of residential care include:

- Dedicated staff trained in evidence-based best practices
- High quality services provided across the state
- Community-based standards (CbS) quality management process providing treatment data
- Residential provider coalition group working well together and with DHS
- Strong individualized education programs

Some challenges to North Dakota’s system of residential care include:

- Retaining a well trained workforce

- Access and exchange of medical information
- Transition services and resources for youth leaving placement
- Increased acuity of youth in placement
- Complexity of the reimbursement system

Residential treatment services for youth have a vital role in the continuum of care in North Dakota. DBGR wants to be part of creating solutions which lead to better outcomes for our youth. We will work tirelessly with the treatment coalition to be leaders in the field and improve the future for North Dakota children. We are committed to working in partnership with all those involved in building a better system of care. Please consider us as a resource to call upon in your work to create legislation that helps all our youth. Vince Lombardi said, “The measure of who we are is what we do with what we have.” Let’s do the best we can for our children with what we have.

Thank you so much for your time. I greatly appreciate your service to all the citizens of North Dakota. This concludes my testimony. I would be glad to answer any questions from the committee.