

Testimony to the Interim Human Services Committee, March 9, 2016

Madame Chair, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today and to be part of this fascinating and potentially historic conversation. My name is Laurie J Baker and I am the of Chair of the North Dakota Coalition for Homeless People (NDCHP) and Executive Director of the Fargo-Moorhead Coalition for Homeless Persons. I am here today on behalf of our executive director Michael Carbone, an individual with a long history of advocacy on behalf of those with behavioral health challenges in North Dakota, and an even longer history with this important institution.

You have heard from my colleagues about some of the specific challenges that providers face on the front lines. I am here to talk with you about what legislation, policy change and willing collaboration can do to address those challenges.

The Coalition's, state and regional, work at the level of systems and policy change. Every stakeholder whose life or profession is touched by homelessness is welcome to participate. Dr. Etherington spoke of serving the poor and uninsured in our state "the most vulnerable of which are the ~~several~~ and persistently mentally ill." I would add "who are homeless" to that definition of the vulnerable. *severely*

Like behavioral health, homeless services uses the continuum of care model, as is appropriate when addressing complex social issues. We see people in the community, after discharge, release or refusal of service. As a Coalition, our goal and our model is Housing First. This is predicated on the evidence-based belief that when people have safe, appropriate and affordable housing they are more likely to engage in the harm reduction practices and changes that can bring about their stable reintegration into the community.

The very poor and the homeless face huge and ever growing barriers to securing rental housing (which is essentially their only housing option), especially when they are also disabled by mental illness. Property managers have strict and restrictive policies regarding renting to people with criminal histories and poor credit. They may not overtly discriminate against people with behavioral health issues, but criminal history is fair game. Serious and persistent mental illness, addiction, or dual diagnosis challenges are common among people experiencing long term homelessness. Both plights are highly criminalized and act very like the cages we saw yesterday – creating too many barriers to be overcome. This is one reason the legislative policy agenda of the NDCHP is relevant to this committee and needs your support and awareness.

We are seeking a one-time contribution to a statewide Landlord Risk Mitigation Fund or equivalent indemnification fund to incentivize landlords to rent to households with barriers. My office in Fargo-Moorhead has been operating such a program for just over a year with the result of 30 households (63 people) successfully leased. Behavioral health clients of Southeast Human Service Center and Lakeland Human Service Center have been a major source of those referred and approve for the fund. When we can talk with landlords on behalf of consumers, and offer them protections for their investment, we can get people housed.

We are seeking reauthorization of the ND Housing Incentive Fund at 50 million per biennium and the establishment of a permanent revenue stream. We urge the legislature to focus on supportive housing and services designed to end or prevent homelessness, and to provide funding to nonprofits or other qualified entities in the form of grants or forgivable or no interest loans to those who use the funds to house people at 30% or less of Area Median Income. The original proposal for the Housing Incentive Fund was focused on accessibility and affordability for the poor and vulnerable. It moved to a workforce focus in response to the state's great need of the moment. As that need has been met, it is time to return to the original intent and create those least restrictive environments we so badly need.

Yesterday, ASA Euren (ur-reen) called for a statewide outcry: "We need more human service supports not less." The NDCHP and regional coalitions agree. Support services are **critical** to housing stability for this population. As is decriminalization or alternatives that avoid arrest and conviction.

We also need to take a closer look at the intersections of behavioral health and the criminalization of youth. We recommend that you continue to develop Youth Trafficking legislation with consideration of emancipation for some youth under age 18; some decriminalization of runaways youth; and/or changes to foster care to permit transitional living for those under 18 and create some supports for youth exiting the Youth Corrections Center. They have none.

I'd like to respond to a couple of other things I heard yesterday. In late 2013 the FM Coalition won a \$200,000 Bush Foundation Community Innovation grant to reengineer homeless services not only in Fargo Moorhead, but throughout the west central Minnesota and the North Dakota COCs (partially in response to one of those lovely

HUD unfunded mandates). One of our innovations is to share data and resources across geo-political boundaries and our progress is being closely watched nationally.

But here's what I really want you to know: One way to identify gaps in the system is to try and change the system. Trying to serve the homeless across borders, in a consumer-centric collaborative way, we have discovered new gaps every single day. We are listing and prioritizing them. Some we have already addressed – one such by creating a housing navigators program that will build relationships with the so-called "hardest to serve" and work on both sides of the river to house them and get them the other services they need. We also have a group of service providers from about 10 agencies meeting weekly to prioritize who is next into housing based on an evidence-based vulnerability assessment. No more first come first served. And it's working. We have launched a local housing crisis line and will soon take it statewide and we are about to launch an application that will help us more efficiently track people's path to housing and long-term stability. I think some of the issues raised yesterday about bed access and prioritization could be addressed by a locally-developed technology solution that would serve multiple sectors. We are working on the same issue with regard to emergency shelter.

Community care requires collaboration, it requires coalitions, and it requires risk; the risk of stepping outside our silos – all the way out – so that social service, law enforcement, medical professionals, and the judiciary are all at the table. Policy makers too.

Yesterday Captain Andy Frobig was asked why we are seeing such an increase in behavioral health problems and in arrests and incarcerations. I have an idea. Punishment and coercion can change behavior, but one must question if the change is whole-hearted or permanent. We know the scars of child abuse (a similar thing) do not build healthy, resilient adults. We need to move away from the paradigm of punishment and reward, embracing instead a model based on connection and restorative justice--that's what I saw happening in the prison yesterday. This combined with an intensive focus on improving the health and lives of our children, especially our poorest children, will reverse this spiral. Everyone needs and deserves a healthy home in a healthy community.

Thank you.

NDCHP State Policy Agenda 2016-2017 (committee draft)

- Reauthorization and a permanent funding stream for the ND Housing Incentive Fund (HIF) include administrative dollars. The reauthorized HIF needs to take advantage of the approximately \$6 Million available to North Dakota in 2016 through the National Housing Trust Fund. The HIF is the right home for these dollars and will help reemphasize Affordable Housing as a priority of the HIF.
- Reauthorize and set a permanent funding stream for the ND Homeless Grants.
- Authorize a one-time contribution to a Landlord Risk Mitigation Fund or equivalent indemnification fund to incentivize landlords to rent to households with barriers (bad/no credit; criminal history; eviction history).
- Continue to develop Youth Trafficking legislation with consideration of emancipation for some youth under age 18; some decriminalization of runaways youth; and/or changes to foster care to permit transitional living for those under 18
- One-time funding (to the Dept. of Commerce) for development of Regional Coalitions related to homelessness, hunger and poverty. Based on the experiences and successes of Coalitions in Region 2, 5, and 7, we know that staffing a coalition results in increased collaboration and innovation, and decreased service duplication. Provide a basic stipend to regional coalitions to hire and house a coordinator or to support a program that benefits the state.
- Collect legislative information related to landlord laws as they apply to vulnerable adults and establishing residency. Propose changes and alternatives.
- Authorize and fund a state-sponsored homeless prevention program.