

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 2275
February 2, 2021

Chair and Members of the Committee.

My name is Anna Frissell. I am the Executive Director of the Red River Children's Advocacy Center, located in Fargo and Grand Forks. I am here today to ask for your support for Senate Bill 2275.

SUMMARY of TESTIMONY:

Child sexual abuse has lasting and damaging impact on the victims.

We have interventions in place in North Dakota to help the survivors, including an extensive child welfare system, led by NDDHS and other agencies and non-profits. We can do more with regard to intervention but we have devoted resources that are constantly improving as funding becomes available and practices improve.

The same is not true for prevention efforts. We know that child sexual abuse is preventable, using a public health approach, by reducing children's exposure to sexual abuse and ensuring safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for all children. North Dakota does not have an effective statewide strategy for the prevention of child sexual abuse.

In 2017, the legislature recognized the lack of such a strategy when it created the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse Task Force focusing on stopping child sexual abuse from happening in the first place.

The Task Force has developed an ambitious statewide strategy (2020 Interim Report attached). In order to implement this strategy, the Task Force requests funding in SB 2275 to hire and equip a position, Director of Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse. The Job Description and Cost Analysis for the position of Director of Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse are attached.

This funding will be appropriated to the Department of Human Services, which will in turn contract with a private contractor. The position would be an employee of the contractor and it has been suggested that could be structured to report to the contractor for administrative purposes and to the Task Force for the implementation of the strategic plan, with accountability to the Department through the granting reporting process.

CONTINUATION OF WRITTEN TESTIMONY:

It is estimated there are 42 million survivors of child sexual abuse in the US and research tells us that 60% of victims never tell anyone about the abuse, living without intervention and dealing with the consequences of trauma for their whole lives^{1,2}. Nearly 70% of all reported sexual assaults (including assaults on adults) target children aged 17 and under^{3,4}.

Children who are sexually abused are at significantly greater risk for a wide variety of mental health and physical health problems including PTSD, anxiety, depression and suicide^{5,6}. They are more likely to have substance abuse issues, delinquency, and academic difficulties^{6,9}. They are at increased risk for teen pregnancy⁷, other sexual behavior problems⁸ and eating disorders¹⁰. Not only does child sexual

abuse affect children, often adults who were abused as children carry this pain with them for a lifetime. Adults with a history of child sexual abuse are 30% more likely than their non-abused peers to have a serious medical condition such as diabetes, cancer, heart problems, stroke or hypertension.¹¹ The Center for Disease Control has estimated the lifetime cost of child abuse to be approximately \$210,012 per victim¹².

Child abuse happens in North Dakota. Every year Children's Advocacy Centers and other providers see hundreds of children that are sexually abused, raped and threatened. These children have experienced and witnessed violence and may have been exploited through pornography and trafficking. All of these singular incidents of trauma and heinous crimes are what our Prevention Task Force is working to keep from happening in the first place.

In North Dakota we have built multiple systems to intervene when sexual abuse of a child occurs. We have an extensive web of criminal and civil laws. We also have a strong child protection system, with years of expertise at the Department of Human Services and our County Social Service and Regional Human Service agencies. Likewise, non-profits like the CACs and many others work diligently to fill in with other intervention services. There are areas we could strengthen in our response when serving these victims but we do have safeguards in place and interventions that are helping the victims once the abuse occurs.

This Task Force is about primary prevention: stopping the sexual abuse from ever happening. The Centers for Disease Control tell us that child sexual abuse is preventable, using a public health approach, by reducing children's exposure to

sexual abuse and ensuring safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for all children.

We have spent time as a Task Force looking at the remarkable work done in other states to stop child sexual abuse. We have also looked at the resources we have in our own state.

Senate Bill 2275 is a carefully thought out request, which will provide much needed funding for resources/capacity to support the work of the Prevention of Sexual Abuse of Children Task Force.

In 2017 the legislature created the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse Task Force committed to improving the response to and prevention of child sexual abuse. In 2019, it extended the time period to 2024 and it added representation and made adjustments. Now we have a multidisciplinary group of professionals working to arm North Dakota to join the war against child sexual abuse waging across the country.

The Task Force brings together a proactive, multidisciplinary statewide team looking at strategies that can bring about change in behavior and norms: Focusing on policies and practices that will work toward the goal of preventing child sexual abuse before it happens. At the same time, developing education plans that educate both adults and children: Arming adults with the knowledge to recognize grooming behaviors used by predators to prey on vulnerable young people, and how to report and of course; supporting body safety education for children, as research tells us they are more likely to tell an adult once they have this knowledge.

Please note the 2020 Interim Report outlining the strategy of the Task Force is attached to this testimony.

The Task Force strategy recognizes that intervention is important in helping those who have been victimized to have the ability to heal and to not continue the cycle of their own abuse. But when one works in the area of child sexual abuse you quickly realize you must not only intervene for the sake of those children who have already been abused but also take steps to stop the abuse from happening in the first place. To this end, the Task Force members are all working toward stopping child sexual abuse.

The Task Force's statewide strategy, will include the promotion of efforts to build or continue effective prevention campaigns that are blossoming in numerous North Dakota communities, like in Cass County where the Stand to Protect campaign is the foundation of a movement that will be customized to the community needs and resources; or Red Flag Green Flag, a foundational and long standing program that has made its way into many school systems; or Darkness to Light used by many agencies around North Dakota to bring education to children and communities. Senate bill 2275 will build resources that will allow exploration about and sharing of these community built resources moving toward the common goal....to end the sexual abuse of our children.

I have served on many Task Forces and typically they have a goal, that with the membership each taking a small piece of the puzzle, can be accomplished. This Task Force's mission is different: Stopping child sexual abuse requires not only

systemic change but changes to our culture and norms. These kinds of changes take dedicated resources and many years but the end result will save countless lives.

I believe there is little controversy about the laudable goal of the Task Force. The Task Force members recognize that the resources of the State are stretched. We have accomplished a great deal as a Task Force as we have set up the play book for moving forward. But we are ambitious and believe that when this Task Force was created it was with the idea to get the plays on the field and win the game! To implement our strategy, we will need the resources to make it happen. The bill will appropriate funding to the Department of Humans Services, which will likely in turn contract with a private contractor. The Department will of course determine the way the funding is implemented but a typical scenario would be an employee of the contractor for administrative purposes reporting to the Task Force for the implementation of the strategic plan, with accountability to the Department through the granting reporting process.

Please note Job Description for the Director of Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse and the Cost Analysis for the position are attached.

We know that child sexual abuse is a serious problem; it is everyone's problem; and something needs to be done about it. The good news is the Task Force is positioned with a well thought out strategy to ramp up the statewide discussion about how North Dakota can lessen the risk to the kids in all of our lives, the children we love.

Chair and Members of the Committee. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify before you today.

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