

**North Dakota Legislative Branch
Industry, Business and Labor Committee**

Personal Testimony for Public Employee Fertility Health Benefits & Self-Insurance Health Plans

Good afternoon, Chariman Lefort and Committee.

My name is Ashley Rae Klinger. I reside with my family of six just outside of Thompson, ND. I'm here today to provide a personal testimony for the Public Employee Fertility Health Benefits & Self-Insurance Health Plans that the committee is considering.

Although our personal journey with infertility and the testimony I'm going to provide may be slightly different from the other testimonies that you hear today, our experience and testimony is equally as important as the next, and I'm hoping that our somewhat "unique" perspective on the topic of infertility, and a person's right to have access to fertility treatments, may help you to view this topic from a different perspective in order to support those who desire the option of conceiving children, and/or to reinforce the support that you already show to them.

As a Woman of God whose life is centered around my faith, I've relied heavily on Isaiah 58:11, which reminds us that "where God guides He provides." As the matriarch for my family, I'm a devoted wife to my husband of five years, Andrew Klinger, a proud mom to our four children, one boy and three girls ages two to four, and a humble servant to the foster children who are welcomed into our home.

As the oldest grandchild of 24, I spent my teens and early twenties nurturing many of my younger cousins. Having always felt a natural maternal energy towards them, I naturally expected to conceive, give birth, and nurture children of my own one day. My maternal grandmother had two sets of twins, and my paternal grandmother was a twin, so the "joke" growing up was that I was likely to be the one who ended up having twins one day. Not knowing how my future husband was going to feel about that, I still welcomed that possibility with open arms.

When I met my husband in 2014 and realized he was the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with and the one who I wanted to have a family with, I naturally began to imagine what our children and what our family would look like one day. I imagined what it would be like to see the positive result on the pregnancy test and the experience of surprising my husband in some clever and creative way with the exciting news. I imagined what it would be like as a woman to be pregnant and to experience the miracle of life growing inside of me. I imagined giving birth to our children and the experience of bringing them home from the hospital for the first time. I imagined all of the things that most parents of children experience. What I didn't imagine was the idea of not being able to conceive children and not being able to experience any of those similar moments that parents cherish and share with their family and friends.

After trying to conceive children for the first two years of our marriage, we learned about our reality of infertility; a reality that continues to result to this day five years later in our inability to conceive. While navigating our reality of infertility initially, it was one of the most challenging chapters in my life. As a woman, I felt like a failure. I felt inadequate. I felt as though I was being punished for all the "wrongs" I did in my life. Worst of all, I felt as though I was letting my husband down by not being able to give him the children he wanted and so deserved.

While considering the options that we had to pursue the family that we both wanted, we, like many couples, took into consideration the many factors that could become obstacles on that journey. Some of those obstacles included, my health as a woman in her late thirties with preexisting conditions, including cancer, and the added physical stress to my body; the dynamics of our relationship as husband and wife and the added emotional stress to that relationship; and last but definitely not least, our financial stability and the added stress related to the financial commitment of fertility treatments. Although we know many couples who have successfully navigated the journey of infertility and have been blessed with the ability to conceive children with the help of various fertility treatments, we made the personal decision together not to pursue many of those similar treatment options, as we also witnessed many couples who did not navigate that journey successfully. And, although it was due to a variety of reasons, the primary reason we witnessed was due to the financial burden and the stress that accompanied it.

So, you may ask how we came to be a family of six. I remind you that where God guides He provides. With His help, we eventually found our inability to conceive and our journey with infertility to be a blessing, as it provided us with the ability to recognize that God was guiding us down a different path and was providing us with a different opportunity to have a family; the opportunity of adoption and foster care. Our little man Micah was placed with us in December 2017 and became forever ours in July 2018. Our foster daughters were placed with us in February 2019 and will become forever ours in a couple of short months.

Although we realized that specific fertility treatments were not the right path for our family, we also realize that adoption and/or foster care may not be the right path for other families. Although we advocate for adoption and foster care, we equally advocate to allow families the option to navigate the path that makes sense for their family. And, if that path is pursuing fertility treatments in order to conceive and start the family that is right for them and their unique journey, then we want to do what we can to support them on that journey, which is why having access to fertility treatments is so important and is a key factor in helping more couples navigate and experience a successful journey rather than an unsuccessful one.

Although we didn't conceive and give birth to our children, we still love and nurture them as our own, and we want other families to have that same opportunity as parents, regardless of how they choose to become the parents they're meant to be.

Take it from me, the personal journey of infertility is challenging enough without unnecessary stressors added to it. The challenge of finances and the stress that comes along with it should not be a part of the infertility/fertility journey. If we can in any way provide families with relief from the financial burden of fertility treatments and the stress that accompanies it, then we should. A family should never have to choose between the stability of their financial future and their ability to start a family.

Thank you for taking the time today to listen to my testimony of our journey with infertility. I hope it has inspired and empowered you in some way to do what you can to support those who are on the journey of becoming the family they're meant to be. #