

Testimony from Erin Prochnow, CEO, YWCA Cass Clay

North Dakota Senate Appropriations Committee

January 29, 2021

SB 2127

Introduction

Good morning Chairman Holmberg and members of the committee, my name is Erin Prochnow, CEO at YWCA Cass Clay. Our agency offers the largest Emergency Shelter for women and their children escaping domestic violence and homelessness in North Dakota and northwestern Minnesota. We also operate a sizeable Supportive Housing Program that, after emergency shelter, is the long-term solution for healing, stability and independence - diminishing the likelihood women will return to abusive partners or fall back into homelessness.

Approval of SB 2127 inclusive of new provisions for those facing homelessness proposed to the North Dakota Housing Incentive Fund (HIF) program will remove women and children from harm's way, safe from dangerous abuse and homelessness. Secondly, it will deliver the highly effective strategy of affordable housing combined with human support from a housing caseworker. Supportive Housing stabilizes families and prevents use of other more costly resources.

Private - Public Partnership

In early 2016, Pastor Joel Baranko from Lutheran Church of the Cross in West Fargo reached out to YWCA to ask about areas of unmet community need; curious how vacant land owned by the church might become part of the solution. The answer was easy: YWCA Cass Clay had clearly identified and documented in our strategic plan a dire need for supportive housing.

Together with our private, public and non-profit partners, YWCA developed Grace Garden in West Fargo, that includes 30 apartments ranging from one to four bedrooms. Configured ideally to accommodate tenant needs and our on-site services, there are two offices for our support services staff, a community room, playground, and patio. YWCA received a HIF investment appropriated through previous legislative sessions. \$500,000 from HIF helped propel Grace Garden from planning and development to reality. Grace Garden opened in 2019, and last year, was home 96 people.

Despite the effectiveness of supportive housing, only a portion of the people who would benefit most actually receive it. Last year, 299 women and children were eligible for our YWCA program, but only 57 women and children – 19% - were able to be accepted. Even with expansion through Grace Garden, we simply don't have enough affordable homes to meet community need. A large body of research shows that the vast majority of people who live in supportive housing are able to remain stably housed in the community, making it the most cost-effective prevention to chronic homelessness.

Our own numbers substantiate this fact: at YWCA, the cost of emergency shelter is \$44 per night while supportive housing at YWCA is \$24 a night. It costs 41% less to provide supportive housing. This economical resource is a path to safety and financial security for women, at the same time lessening use of emergency, health care and other resources.

Changing the Course of Her Life: From Crisis to Independence

When a woman arrives at the YWCA, she often lacks the building blocks to independence: a living wage, adequate credit, childcare and transportation. Our comprehensive programs and services help women overcome these barriers.

In 2020, the average stay at our Emergency Shelter was 36 days. While women can make significant progress in just over a month, this is typically not enough time to gain enduring financial

security and self-reliance. Women must recover physically and mentally from abuse. She may have a disability, or need to attend school, or be working hard to regain credit history and financial footing.

YWCA's Supportive Housing Program provides stability and a light hand of support to help women troubleshoot and problem-solve setbacks in life. The supportive services help vulnerable people who have histories of trauma, chronic health conditions, poverty or other struggles come to thrive in the community. In our experience, beyond rental assistance, survivors gain a YWCA housing advocate as their human support. Advocates are difference-makers who help women gain jobs and education, overcome obstacles related to childcare, car breakdowns, health setbacks and more. They skillfully use an empowerment approach that helps women summon their own courage and grow in problem-solving and resolve. Women are guided to set concrete goals. They gain caring encouragement that helps them stay focused on convictions they've set. As women grow in personal autonomy, they avoid the paths of returning to abusers, substance dependency, or interaction with costly social systems like emergency care, law enforcement, the foster system and more. Tenants grow abilities to stay housed. They become healthier and reconnect to the community. They lead lives on paths of their own choosing. Supportive housing is a proven and cost-effective way to reduce shelter occupancy and the homeless population, breaking the cycles of poverty and violence.

On average, a woman stays in our Supportive Housing Program just 24 months. It's a short time in which families break the cycles of poverty and violence. A woman who participates in the program earns more money, is healthier, and better equipped to live independently and create an environment for her children to thrive.

- 56% of participants increased their education or income level
- 71% of participants improved their health and wellness

- 62% of participants reduced their use of emergency services
- 93% of participants obtained stable housing upon exiting the program

Just recently, a woman we served about five years ago contacted YWCA supportive housing staff after she experienced a financial setback due to coronavirus. She has no family in the area, or any kind of support system you can go to with complete vulnerability asking for help. She said:

“I was doing fine and getting along well until I got sick and spent two weeks in intensive care without a paycheck,” she told us. “You’ve been there for me before, and I hoped you could help as I get back on my feet again. You are *my people*.”

YWCA provided Christmas gifts for her children, and basic household necessities to lessen the demand on her paycheck.

Wherever a woman may be on her journey, together we must walk alongside her to ensure she has access to the tools and resources necessary to heal, reach her goals and ultimately, build a future free from violence for her family.

YWCA Cass Clay supports a due pass of SB 2127. Thank you.