

Mark Heinert

Assistant Executive Director, Youthworks

Testimony in support of SB 2265

Senate Human Services Committee

January 26, 2021

Chairman Lee and Members of the Committee:

My name is Mark Heinert, and I am here today to deliver testimony in support of SB 2265. I have been a licensed social worker in North Dakota for 30 years, serving runaway and homeless youth for the last 24. I am the Assistant Executive Director at Youthworks, a private, non-profit, youth serving agency serving Runaway and Homeless Youth in North Dakota. I am also the current president of the Missouri Valley Coalition for Homeless People, Inc.

I support SB2265, which would allow unaccompanied homeless youth 14 and older to consent for routine health care, including behavioral health care – but not abortion. At Youthworks, over 100 youth are served annually who are runaway or homeless and under the age of 18. These youth are more likely to experience behavioral health issues including clinical depression. They experience a high rate of suicidal attempts and frequently are not able to access any health care without parental consent. These youth need access to basic health, dental health, and behavioral health services. Especially during a pandemic, basic medical care is necessary for youth on their own. It is not uncommon for youth who seek services in our agency to be unable to get this service and then go underground to prevent the system from being aware of their needs.

Currently, North Dakota law allows youth under age 18 to access only a limited scope of health services: STD and substance abuse treatment, prenatal and pregnancy care, and emergency care. Unaccompanied homeless minors cannot access basic health care (including physicals and dental care), or behavioral health care, without parental consent. These restrictions put youth at risk for serious health consequences, and even death. SB 2265 would remove these barriers, in a narrowly focused way that will only impact the small but very vulnerable population of unaccompanied homeless youth in North Dakota.

This bill, along with SB 2258 were the result of listening sessions with homeless youth across the state of North Dakota. They have shared what have been barriers to their success, and I ask you today to help reduce one of these barriers by voting in favor of SB 2265.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions at: 701-255-6909 or mheinert@youthworksnd.org