

Testimony
Long-Term Care Committee
Study for the Feasibility & Desirability of Establishing a Transition to
Independence Program for Young Adults with Mental Illness
Senator Dever, Chairman
September 18, 2008

Senator Dever and members of the Long-Term Care Committee, I am Susan H. Wagner, LSW, Human Service Program Administrator, with the Division of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (DMHSAS), Department of Human Services (DHS).

The Committee has requested information in regard to an update from the Department of Human Services on the development of plans to improve the coordination and collaboration of children's transitional services in the state.

I will provide information on a number of activities related to children's transitional services that the Division of Mental Health and Substance Abuse and Children and Family Services Division are involved in.

Wanda Bye mentioned the establishment of a Youth Advisory Council (YAC). The Youth Advisory Council is an effort initiated by the DMHSAS, DHS, as of December 1, 2007. A planning group has been established to over see this effort. Members of the group include: Dawn Pearson, Program/Policy Administrator, DMHSAS; Dean Sturn, Independent Living Program Administrator, CFS Division; Pam Sagness, Prevention Administrator, DMHSAS; Wendy LaMontagne, newly hired Children's Mental Health Administrator, DMHSAS; and me. The Council will advise the DHS, DMHSAS, and other system partners on issues of concern to North Dakota's youth, especially enforcing underage drinking, transition

to adulthood, and overall health/well-being. Youth involved in the following systems will be represented on the YAC: mental health, juvenile justice, substance abuse, tribal agencies, foster care, developmental disabilities, vocational rehabilitation, special education, community providers, and community youth groups. Youth not involved in a system of care are recruited and encouraged to join as well. In April of this year, systems partners received information and an invitation to consider referring youth to serve on the council. To date, we have received the names of 18 youth. Each youth has received information related to the Council and were invited to attend the first meeting which was held on August 6, 2008. Six youth attended the first meeting which was the beginning of important discussions of issues pertinent to youth of North Dakota. Suicide prevention and substance abuse prevention were the two most important issues the group mentioned. We began some leadership building exercises with the group as well. The next meeting is set for September 18 and 19, 2008 where we intend to have a more in-depth discussion about issues facing youth today and continue leadership building exercises. Additional information about the Youth Advisory Council is attached.

In February 2007, the Department submitted an application to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Center for Mental Health Services (SAMHSA) for financial support as part of the New Freedom Initiative: State Coalitions to Promote Community-Based Care. The application was approved and the Division received an award of \$20,000 for a period of three years. A portion of the funding has been used to establish a Transition Flex Fund. The purpose of the fund is to assist youth ages 17-21, with expenses related to transition to adulthood. The fund supplements other sources of financial support and resources

available to youth for one-time requests. A formal request procedure is in place with each individual request reviewed and approved by me. To date, the fund has assisted 20 youth with the purchase of clothing, food, household items, rent deposits and rent, a computer, specialized camera for a youth who is blind, transit tickets and bus tokens, and a social skills building course. A portion of this funding has been set aside to reimburse youth and a parent/guardian to attend the YAC meetings.

In April of this year, Governor John Hoeven received an invitation from the Child, Adolescent, and Family Branch of the Center for Mental Health Services, SAMHSA, and Georgetown University National Technical Assistance Center for Children's Mental Health to submit an application for a National Policy Academy on Developing Systems of Care for Youth and Young Adults with Mental Health Needs who are Transitioning to Adulthood, and Their Families. The Department submitted the application. Unfortunately, North Dakota was not selected as one of six applications but an offer was made to involve North Dakota in ongoing technical assistance. On a positive note, the application details an assessment of the current status of services and supports for youth and young adults with mental health needs that are transitioning to adulthood, a general description of a policy initiative, proposed outcomes of the policy initiative, and key individuals and groups that would be involved in moving forward the policy initiative. All of this information can be utilized as we move ahead with efforts to develop a program to address these issues.

Dean Sturn, Independent Living Program Administrator, CFS Division, oversees an advisory group of youth who are or who have been in foster care. The formal name of the group is ND Youth. The group continues to

work on getting the word out about foster youth in care, dispelling myths related to youth in care, and helping to mentor each other. At other times, there is preparation for youth to take part in the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) process and stakeholder meetings. Members of the groups (State-wide and regional) have spoken to groups in their communities. One of the youth testified before a legislative sub-committee during the last session. The group is also working on a website that is to serve as a resource to all youth who are transitioning into adulthood. There will be links to numerous transitioning resources both on a regional level and a state/national level.

The Department of Human Services is available to provide any additional information to this committee as your work continues on this important issue. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them at this time. Thank you.