

**Testimony
Human Services Committee
House Bill 1044
Representative Weisz, Chairman
January 13, 2009**

Representative Weisz and members of the Human Services Committee, I am Susan Wagner, LSW, Human Service Program Administrator, with the Division of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services of the Department of Human Services.

On behalf of the Department, I am here to testify about activities related to transition-aged youth.

The Youth Advisory Council (YAC) is an effort initiated by the Division as of December 1, 2007. The purpose of the Council is to advise the Department and other system partners on issues of concern to North Dakota's youth, especially enforcing underage drinking, transition to adulthood, and overall health and wellbeing. Youth involved in the following systems are 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. To date, the group identified suicide prevention and substance abuse prevention as the two most important issues affecting our youth. Future meetings will focus on these issues and leadership skill building.

Efforts are underway to add two youth representatives to the Governor-appointed North Dakota Mental Health Planning Council.

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 per year for a period of three years. A portion of the funding established 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. To date, the fund has assisted 21 youth with the purchase of clothing, food, household items, rent deposits and rent, a computer, a specialized camera for a youth who is blind, transit tickets and bus tokens, and a social skills course. A portion of this funding has been set aside to reimburse youth and a parent or guardian to attend the YAC meetings.

Historically, multiple systems in North Dakota have worked closely to meet the needs of children, youth, and their families. In 1994, the Division of Mental Health Services was awarded a comprehensive community mental health services grant from the Center for Mental Health Services targeting children and adolescents diagnosed with serious emotional disorders. This grant provided the impetus for a formalized statewide system of care for children. Based on the tenants of the wraparound philosophy, services developed or enhanced through the grant included care coordination, respite care, non-hospital crisis care, school-based day treatment, and intensive in-home therapy. North Dakota has sustained those core services. Key to the children's mental health system of care is a strong partnership with families and the integration of services across systems. The wraparound process is a method show to improve the functioning of children and youth who have complex needs. The wraparound process includes a set of core elements: 1) individualized plans of care; 2) culturally competent and tailored to the

unique needs of families; 3) parental involvement; 4) strength-based; and 5) least restrictive setting. It is recognized that all children and youth that come into contact with the various service systems can benefit from being served using the tenants of the wraparound process.

A process to assist children in the transition from the children's mental health system to the adult mental health system of care is in place. The youth, family members, care coordinators, case managers, and other team members work closely together to make this transition as seamless as possible. To be most effective, the coordinated effort needs to begin six months prior to the youth turning 18.

The Division leads the community-based public mental health system and Department divisions and other systems partners in implementing various mental health transformation activities and evidence-based practices. These include Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Structural Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress, Integrated Dual Disorder Treatment, planning for SAMSA's model of Supported Employment pilot project, peer support services, Mental Health Consumer and Family Network, Mental Health Recovery and Social Inclusion Campaign, collaboration with the University System on Science to Services, Workforce Development in conjunction with Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) Mental Health Division, and development of a statewide, comprehensive prevention framework.

Other services and resources available to youth and young adults through the regional human services include substance abuse assessment and treatment; psychological and psychiatric evaluations; individual, group, and family therapy services; case aide services; flexible funding; crisis residential services; and vocation guidance and counseling.

The Children and Family Services (CFS) Division of the Department administers the Chafee grant and supervises the Regional Chafee Foster Care Independence and Education Training Voucher (ETV) Programs located throughout the state. This program incorporates the values, principles, and beliefs of the wraparound process. The foster youth who are transitioning to adulthood have a Single Plan of Care (SPOC) or a Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) plan in place to help them progress through transition toward self sufficiency. North Dakota's overall goal is for every young adult who lived in foster care as a teenager to meet the following outcomes by age 21:

- All youth leaving the foster care system shall have sufficient economic resources to meet their daily needs.
- All youth leaving the foster care system shall have a safe and stable place to live.
- All youth leaving the foster care system shall attain academic or vocational and educational goals that are in keeping with the youth's abilities and interests.
- All youth leaving the foster care system shall have a sense of connectedness to persons and community.
- All youth leaving the foster care system shall avoid illegal and high risk behaviors.
- All youth leaving the foster care system shall postpone parenthood until financially established and emotionally mature.
- All youth leaving the foster care system shall have access to physical and mental health services.

Through the Independent Living Program, a statewide independent living skills curriculum has been established. The curriculum is facilitated by Independent Living Coordinators at the regional level.

The Independent Living Program Administrator, CFS Division, oversees and advisory group of youth who are or who have been in foster care. The formal name of the group is ND Youth. The group works on spreading the word about foster youth in care, dispelling myths related to youth in care, and helping mentor each other. There is preparation for youth to take part in the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) process and stakeholder meetings. Members of the groups (statewide and regional) have spoken to groups in their communities. One of the youth testified before a legislative subcommittee during the last session. The group is also is 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 and national level.

In April of 2008, 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 an 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.

The Department of Public Instruction, Office of Special Education, Transition Community of Practice Advisory Council (COP), formerly known as the North Dakota Transition Steering Committee, is co-facilitated by Vocational Rehabilitation. The Council has expanded their membership to include representation from the Division of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and Children and Family Services. Participation on this Council will provide the Department with an ongoing opportunity to network with other state agencies in the effort to provide information about the needs of youth in transition and improve services to them.

The Department 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.