

Testimony
Human Services Committee
Representative Chuck Damschen, Chairman
August 28, 2014

Chairman Damschen and members of the Human Services Committee, I am Trisha Page, Autism Coordinator for the Department of Human Services, Autism Services Unit (DHS/ASU). Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the autism spectrum disorder voucher program pilot project.

The voucher program went into effect on July 1, 2014, as was approved during the 2013 legislative session. The individuals served by the voucher program are families with an income below 200% of the federal poverty level that have a child with an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis who is under the age of 18 years.

The voucher program is set up in a three-step process toward securing needed services or items. The first step is income verification. Families submit the voucher application and the household income is verified by the state Economic Assistance or Medicaid staff. If the family meets the income guidelines, the second step is that they are notified and given a purchase request form to fill out. The items are verified as relevant and appropriate purchases, then the purchase is made (step three) for the family.

When a family requests the autism voucher, they are given three options. Since each qualifying child is eligible for up to \$12,500 a year, families can make three choices:

1. They can choose a one-time item(s) purchase. This would mean that the family is looking to make a one-time purchase (such as a weighted blanket, pressure vest, parent training event) and they do not intend to use any further voucher dollars.
2. They can choose to use voucher funds for on-going services. If a family selects this option, it would be for a reoccurring service (such as respite care) that would continue until the annual voucher amount has been exhausted or the voucher year ends.
3. They can choose both the single item purchases and the on-going services.

If a family chooses the first option, they can make purchase requests up to the full \$12,500, but if they do not need to use the full fund amount, the dollars can be released into the voucher pool to be accessed by another approved applicant. By providing this option, the voucher funds will be able to be used while also serving more families.

If a family chooses options two or three, the full \$12,500 will be obligated for that family. If the family were to go six months without using the voucher funds, reminders to the family would be given at three and five months, and the remaining funds would be released into the voucher pool for other families to access.

If a family decides that they would like to make an additional purchase after their "one time purchase" or an inactive voucher user would like to access the funds at a later date, they do not need to apply again,

but contact the ASU to resubmit another purchase request form and provide the required professional recommendation(s).

Applications for the autism voucher have been made available online through the new state autism webpage. Applications can be submitted to the ASU online through the webpage, emailed to the autism coordinator, or printed and returned by mail or by fax. Efforts are being made to spread the word about the program across the state through the development of a public service announcement and a number of presentations to an array of different organizations such as the board for the North Dakota Centers for Persons with Disabilities (NDCPD), Family Voices of North Dakota, and the Partnership program, as well as discussions with a number of private agencies such as Anne Carlsen Center, Sanford, Pediatric Therapy Partners, and Fraser, Inc.

Agencies are also taking an interest in the voucher program, as they have expressed this is an opportunity to help the families they serve who cannot otherwise afford or access the types of supports and services that are made available through the voucher program. The ASU has received several calls from a wide range of professionals, from Developmental Disabilities program managers that serve families with children leaving the infant development program to county social workers, to therapists and teachers. All are interested in connecting families with the program.

Currently, 16 voucher applications have been received since July 1 and dozens more phone calls and emails asking for information on the program have been received. There have been nine families that have

met the income criteria and are in the process of securing the item prices, location, and professional recommendations. One child has been denied because the child was part of the state foster system and the supports requested were the responsibility of the foster care system. The remaining six applications are awaiting income verification.

Requests or interests in purchases include autism-specific camps, job coaching for a 16-year old in a rural community, a service dog to detect seizures and prevent wandering, an iPad, and a note-taking device in preparation to attend college.

Conclusion

As the autism spectrum disorder voucher program pilot project continues to unfold, DHS has seen a growing interest from families and agencies for the support of the program. The items and services requested are anticipated to meet a wide array of needs that are as varied as the spectrum disorder itself. As word continues to spread and applications continue to come in, this is anticipated to be a highly successful program in the autism community.

Thank you for your time and I am available for questions.