

Testimony for Human Services Committee
Department of Human Services
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Task Force and Pilot Project
August 12, 2020

Chairman Rohr, members of the Human Services Committee, I am Krista Fremming, Assistant Director of the Medical Services Division for the Department of Human Services (DHS) and Chair of the Governor's Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Task Force. North Dakota Century Code chapter 50-06-32 requires the Task Force to provide an annual report to the Governor and the Legislative Council regarding the status of the ASD Task Force State Plan as well as a report on the ASD program pilot project. I appear to provide information on both topics.

The ASD Task Force was established in 2009 by Senate Bill 2174. The Task Force members include the state health officer, or the officer's designee; the director of the department of human services, or the director's designee; the superintendent of public instruction, or the superintendent's designee; the executive director of the protection and advocacy project, or the director's designee; and the following members who are appointed by the governor:

- A pediatrician with expertise in the area of ASD;
- A psychologist with expertise in the area of ASD;
- A college of education faculty member with expertise in the area of ASD;
- A behavioral specialist;
- A licensed teacher with expertise in the area of ASD;
- An occupational therapist;

- A representative of a health insurance company doing business in this state;
- A representative of a licensed residential care facility that provides care and services to individuals with ASD;
- A representative who is an enrolled member of a federally recognized Indian tribe;
- An adult self-advocate with ASD;
- A parent of a child with ASD;
- A family member of an adult with ASD; and,
- A member of the legislative assembly.

The Task Force meets quarterly to discuss the following topics:

- early intervention services;
- family support services that would enable an individual with ASD to remain in the least restrictive home-based or community setting;
- programs transitioning an individual with ASD from a school-based setting to adult day programs and workforce development programs;
- the cost of providing services; and,
- the nature and extent of federal resources that can be directed to the provision of services for individuals with ASD.

DHS maintains a website to publish information on Task Force activities <http://www.nd.gov/dhs/autism/taskforce.html>. The website includes the Task Force meeting schedule, previous meeting minutes, reports and the ASD State Plan.

The ASD State Plan is developed and implemented by the Task Force. The State Plan goals and the progress toward those goals include:

I. Children: Birth Through Age 18

- Assure that individuals with suspected ASD receive an appropriate diagnosis as soon as possible.
 - The Task Force continues to monitor the state ASD registry which is administered by the Department of Health. Recent progress includes automated reporting from several health care providers regarding newly diagnosed individuals with ASD. This has decreased the burden for health care providers who diagnose ASD and ensures that more diagnoses are being reported timely to the registry. The Task Force is also continuing to investigate the possibility of more health care payers covering multidisciplinary diagnostic clinics, which are the gold standard for diagnosing ASD.
- Review and provide recommendations on the current centralized location(s) for information on ASD.
 - Currently, the DHS website hosts the ASD Task Force webpage. The Task Force has made recommendations on additions to the webpage and ways to drive more traffic to the webpage.
- Establish a model identifying training and education opportunities currently available that address the needs of diverse stakeholders.
 - The Task Force was involved in planning for the 2020 statewide ASD conference, which was canceled due to COVID-19. The conference planning committee hopes that the conference can be held in 2021.

II. Adults: Age 18 and up (including transition age)

- Identify the needs and service gaps for adults with ASD.

- Employment supports were identified as a need for adults with ASD. The Task Force recommended that the 2019 Legislative Assembly provide funding for 24 additional Extended Services slots for adults with ASD, to assist them with maintaining employment. The legislature adopted this recommendation and the new slots became available in January 2020. Currently, 9 of the slots have been filled and the Task Force will be working with DHS Field Services (Field Services administers the program) to promote the open slots so they can be filled as soon as possible.
- Strengthen supports for transitions from adolescent to adult services.
 - Several workshops across the state have been delivered to families that focus on transition issues.
- Develop more opportunities for adults with ASD to be valued, contributing members of their communities based on their unique strengths, differences and challenges.

The Task Force is reorganizing its workgroups into two groups focused on communication/public awareness and training/education. Based on the feedback from the new groups, the State Plan may be updated to reflect different goals and objectives.

I will also provide an update on the ASD program pilot project, known as the ASD voucher program. The voucher program was established in 2014 to assist with funding equipment, assistive technology, respite care and other supports. The voucher is for families with children diagnosed with ASD between the ages of three and 18 whose household incomes are up

to 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Children who receive voucher services may not also receive Medicaid waiver services.

The ASD voucher has filled gaps for many families over the past six years, and DHS continues to look for ways to maximize program resources. During the 2017-19 biennium, about 30 percent of the program appropriation was expended. The 2019 Legislative Assembly authorized DHS to consider administrative code changes that will enable better use of program resources. DHS consulted with the ASD Task Force on administrative code changes which went into effect on April 1, 2020.

Changes to administrative code include reducing the amount of time that a family must expend their allocated funds. Each child is eligible to receive up to \$12,500 per year to be used for services and items that help with their ASD diagnosis. When families apply for the voucher, they must provide a plan on how they will use the funds. Changes to code indicate that if the voucher is not used for 60 days, DHS will inform the family that if an additional 30 days pass without a purchase or request, the voucher will be terminated. Terminated voucher funds may then be returned to the program to be distributed to another applicant. Children utilizing the voucher used an average of \$3,187 during the 2019-20 program year.

COVID-19 impacted some children's ability to receive respite care services, due to respite agencies not going into homes in April and May. Respite care picked back up in June. Even without the COVID-19 impact, however, most children would not have used their full \$12,500.

This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions.