



Building strong alliances that ensure quality behavioral health services, including substance use & mental health services, are accessible to everyone in our state.

Testimony for the Health and Human Services Committee on LR143

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Good morning Senators. My name is Katie McLeese Stephenson, spelled K-A-T-I-E M-c-L-E-E-S-E S-T-E-P-H-E-N-S-O-N. I am pleased to join you this morning regarding this important issue. I serve as the Executive Director of HopeSpoke here in Lincoln. Our organization was founded in 1949 as the Child Guidance Center. We rebranded in 2018 as HopeSpoke. Our mission Inspiring Children & Families to Move Forward.

In the most recent fiscal year our organization provided services to nearly 1500 individuals. Seventy-eight percent of those that we served were under the age of 19. Since our inception we provide outpatient services and for the last 25 years we have also provided on-site outpatient therapy in Lincoln's Public Schools elementary, middle, and high schools. This past year we had services in 23 LPS schools. During the 20-21 fiscal we provided 9,910 hours of telehealth across all of our programs. From March of 2020 to March of 2021 our outpatient services were provided exclusively through telehealth.

For over 25 years we have provided suicide risk assessments and therapy to youth that are detained at the Lancaster County Assessment Center. For 27 years we have provided behavioral health services in our Extended Day Treatment program for children ages 5-12 who have significant emotional regulation issues with 17-20 hours a week of individual, group, family, and milieu-based therapy. For 28 years we have provided a Therapeutic Group Home for twelve adolescent males from across the state who are referred to us by the courts and Juvenile Probation for intensive individual, group and family therapy focused on their sexually reactive behaviors where they have sexually harmed others. We are the only provider of services in our community at the detention center, extended day treatment program and Therapeutic Group Home specialized in treating adolescent males that have sexually harmed others.

Today I am representing the 52 behavioral health organizations large and small, rural, and urban that comprise the membership of the Nebraska Association of Behavioral Health Organizations commonly referred to as NABHO. I serve as President Elect of this association. During the last 17 months that the pandemic has in our lives we have worked to provide uninterrupted behavioral health services to the thousands of Nebraskans that live with mental health and substance use disorders. This has required us all to be innovative as we strive to provide the highest quality behavioral health services while keeping our clients, staff, and the community safe.

Prior to the pandemic it was thought that one in five of us lived with a mental health or substance use disorder. Since the pandemic that figure is now thought to be one in three. I would challenge us to think that everyone has experienced some form of anxiety and depression since March of 2020. The number of individuals in need of our services has skyrocketed and those that were already in services have experienced exacerbated needs with their mental health and substance use disorders. Our organization has seen our outpatient waiting list grow from an average of 30 during most years to a record high of nearly 170.

The average time between an individual experiencing mental health and substance use disorder symptoms and seeking services is eight years. By the time that someone reaches out for services it is critical that our system has the capacity to respond to it. In Lincoln many people who need services are waiting up to six months to begin while their symptoms may be critically impacted. This is why LR143 is so important. We must do better for Nebraskans in need.

Across all sectors there is a critical shortage of workforce. This is especially evident in behavioral health. Our dedicated staff are underpaid for their important work. Many of our organizations have given our staff seen a growing turnover rate. At HopeSpoke we experienced a nearly 50% turnover of our therapists that provide school based mental health services. We started the school year

unable to serve many established clients in several schools. I am happy to report that we will be fully staffed in October at our school sites, but we have had to reduce our sites from 23 to 18 schools this year based on workforce and funding.

To combat the workforce issues our organizations have increased staff salaries to retain our talented professionals, while our revenue has remained relatively flat. Many of us have implemented hiring bonuses and hazard pay all while our revenue has remained relatively flat. We continue to give our staff salary increases all while our revenue has remained relatively flat. At HopeSpoke these increases have totaled over \$250,000 that we will offset with fundraising. This year we need to raise nearly \$750,000 in grants and donations just to meet our budget and are still projecting a deficit of potentially \$100,000.

In my nearly 40 years of working with children and families in need through the state, judicial branch, and the nonprofit sector, this has been the most challenging time that I have experienced. It is also a time for great opportunity and innovation. The key elements of LR143 together can create a more robust and effective behavioral health system for our most vulnerable Nebraskans. We have an opportunity to enhance and improve our system with the use of federal funds put in place to combat the impact of the pandemic.

Thank you for your work individually and collectively as Senators representing not only your district, but all Nebraskans. Thank you for your willingness to support behavioral health and innovation that will help to stabilize an already fragile system.

I would be happy to respond to any questions that you might have.