



May 6, 2021

To: Members of the 2021 Health and Human Services Conference Committee
Re: HF2128/SF2360 Health and Human Services Omnibus Budget Bill

Dear Chair Liebling, Chair Benson and Members of the HHS Conference Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments as you work together to build a health and human services budget that will promote health and well-being for all Minnesotans. We are grateful for your leadership as you make difficult decisions about this final budget as it will have immediate and long-term impacts on our communities.

Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota (LSS) is a provider of essential services across all 87 counties with more than 2,500 employees and 10,000 volunteers serving 1 in 65 Minnesotans every year. We are honored to have the opportunity to help our neighbors access housing, meals, community connection and person-centered supports that are critical to holistic well-being.

We support policies that improve and protect access to services, promote social connectedness and enhance the quality of life for our neighbors. Thank you, again, for the opportunity to share comments on the provisions we strongly support and provisions we hope you will continue to consider.

Thank you for the Senate and House's shared support of the following proposals:

- **Child Foster Care Background Study Modifications.** Keeping families safe and together improves outcomes and reduces trauma related to out-of-home placements for youth, families and communities. This proposal will eliminate unnecessary barriers to licensure, promote family preservation and address outcome disparities for Black, Indigenous and people of color engaging with the child welfare system.
- **Transition Period for COVID-19 Background Studies.** We support extending current background study waiver requirements and would recommend an extension of 365 days to ensure providers can continue to serve individuals at the end of the public health emergency. These flexibilities remain critical to maintaining the direct care workforce that help people with disabilities and older adults stay healthy and thrive in their community.



- **Telemedicine Expansion in Minnesota Health Care Programs.** We support the inclusion of audio-only services and reimbursement equal to in-person services. This has been a successful tool to bring services to people who may otherwise not access mental health care. Additionally, we strongly support an individual's right to decide how they receive their care and only utilize telehealth with informed patient consent. Telehealth, including audio-only services, creates a pathway to stay connected to services when transportation challenges, day care cancellations, illness, or other unexpected events would otherwise lead to a cancelled appointment. During stressful times, a phone call with an existing and trusted provider can prevent a need for more intensive services or a visit to the emergency room.
- **Mental Health Uniform Service Standards (USS).** Thank you for including the first phase of USS which will create a more unified licensing framework for community-based mental health services. We are hopeful that the USS proposal will successfully reduce administrative burden and build accountability where it matters. LSS provides high-quality behavioral health support by a variety of licensed professionals serving neighbors across the state and life span. This includes early childhood mental health, and we strongly support the inclusion of early childhood policy provisions including the use of the DC:0-5 diagnostic tool. This tool has nationwide support and is an important part of building the early childhood mental health system.

Please consider the following requests:

- **Remove the Blue Ribbon Commission (BRC) Proposal to Implement Family Foster Care Rate Tiers.** We request that family foster care rate tiers are not implemented until stakeholders have been convened to inform a high-quality life sharing service and reimbursement model that reflects the 24/7 commitment, experience and supervision provided by family foster care providers in relationship with a life sharing agency. We are concerned that without this, the reduction in rates may be unsustainable for family foster care providers thereby decreasing access to individuals seeking this important service. **Please adopt the Senate's position.**
- **Implementing DWRS Rates for Remote Service Provision.** Please support a rate framework that reflects the costs associated with remote service delivery rather than implementing a rate reduction. During the COVID-19 pandemic, service providers innovated and adapted to maintain access to essential services while prioritizing the health and wellness of individuals accessing services and direct support staff. Remote supports remain key to mitigating isolation and improving social and emotional connection during the public health and economic crisis. **Please adopt the Senate's position.**
- **Personal Care Assistance/Direct Support Professional Support During Hospital Stays.** Please support the provision that directs the Department of Human Services to work with stakeholders to create a reimbursement pathway for individualized support during short-term hospital stays.



This will improve collaboration between individuals receiving care and their providers, and it will help people receive person-centered, continuous and culturally-responsive care. **Please adopt the Senate's position.**

- **Increased Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) to HCBS programs.** The American Rescue Plan Act includes historic and unprecedented investments including a one-year, 10% FMAP increase specific to HCBS programs with explicit direction to supplement *not* supplant current HCBS programs. These funds have the opportunity to directly benefit Minnesotans who access HCBS Medicaid supports as well as their family, direct staff and provider organizations. **Please distribute funds to all HCBS providers in an equitable way. We support the Senate's inclusion of a proposal to utilize a portion of these funds for retainer payments to organizations providing disability waiver services.**

As you continue to work toward compromise, please know LSS is thankful for your thoughtful leadership and support of neighbors helping neighbors. If we can be of service or provide additional information, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

Sincerely,

Erin Sutton
Senior Director of Advocacy
Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota
erin.sutton@lssmn.org
c: 612-708-5703