

March 11, 2025

Chairman Hoffman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of individuals with disabilities and their families. As requested by Chairman Hoffman last year, I brought Charlie with me to meet all of you today. After speaking before you last March, I had truly hoped we wouldn't need to return. After all, Natasha Merz and the Department of Human Services (DHS) were strongly encouraged to collaborate with stakeholders. However, I am here today to inform you that no meaningful efforts have been made by DHS in this regard.

I am the parent of a child with disabilities and I am a member of the Waiver Reimagine Advisory Committee (WRAC). I have worked with children and youth with disabilities and their families for over 14 years, helping them navigate complex systems of care, including Medicaid Waivers.

HCBS (Home and Community-Based Services) Waivers were designed to allow individuals with disabilities to remain in their homes and communities. These waivers have been instrumental in the movement toward de-institutionalization. If we proceed with Waiver Reimagine as proposed by DHS, Minnesota could lead a troubling new path to *re-institutionalize* its citizens with disabilities. Minnesotans like Charlie deserve to live a life of choice in their homes and communities, not in institutional settings.

The disability community, along with this Senate committee and the WRAC, has been advocating for DHS to stop creating policies and programs *for* us through a one-sided process. We have abundant data and research showing that collaboration with stakeholders at the systems level saves money and greatly improves outcomes. I have personally spoken with DHS staff individually, during WRAC meetings, and through emails, offering to help DHS understand how to engage with communities in a collaborative manner, specifically regarding Waiver Reimagine. Best practices for this process exist, and I have shared specific resources with DHS multiple times. These practices include simple but effective strategies **such as having co-chairs or co-facilitators for the WRAC, and ensuring that stakeholders drive the meeting agendas. I have repeatedly explained that a text box on a meeting feedback form is *not* meaningful engagement.** DHS should *want* this authentic partnership, but clearly, they do not.

I believe all of you would be deeply concerned by how WRAC members have been treated during these meetings, facing condescension and belittlement. It has become painfully clear that we are treated as a mere checkbox and are not regarded as experts on these matters.

We have demanded that DHS partner with stakeholders—people with disabilities (PWD) and their families—to make crucial decisions regarding Waiver Reimagine, but they have refused. Therefore, we ask that you hold DHS accountable in the following ways:

See SF no 2215

1. **Require a report before seeking CMS approval for any aspect of Waiver Reimagine, in collaboration with the WRAC.**
2. **Before seeking federal approval for a Waiver Reimagine plan or its implementation, the Commissioner of Human Services must first submit the plan to a Legislative Task Force on Waiver Reimagine, the legislature, and all recipients of waiver services.**

Last year, DHS received strong encouragement during the March Senate Committee meeting. However, it feels as if they walked away without taking it seriously. Because here we are again, with no significant changes—WRAC members can attest to this.

My colleagues will provide expert testimony today, underscoring the importance of waivers and expressing how much we value living in a state that treats citizens with disabilities with dignity by supporting HCBS Waivers. They will share specific details about how vital these waivers and the related services are to us. They will also reference many ways in which the proposed WR plan will take all of this away. Historically, conditions in institutions and facilities were characterized by poor care and education, segregation, isolation, overcrowding, underfunding, and neglect. We now face a staffing shortage—can you imagine returning to those conditions, or worse? Can you imagine sending your vulnerable family member to a facility? I cannot. And I will not.

Medicaid and Waivers in Minnesota are not perfect, but we must continue to improve them. Waiver Reimagine must be reworked to prevent forced institutionalization and ensure equity, independence, and dignity for people with disabilities—for *Charlie*.

Thank you!

Tricia and Charlie Brisbine