



LB78 Committee Hearing Testimony

Good afternoon, Chairman von Gillern and members of the Revenue Committee.

My name is Veronica Pino. I serve as the St. Gianna Program Manager at Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska. And I'm here to support LB78.

The mission of Catholic Social Services is to perform the works of mercy in response to the call of God and to inspire hope and love in every encounter we have with our clients and others we serve. Our organization serves Nebraskans within the region of the Catholic Diocese of Lincoln which includes all the counties south of the Platte River, east to west.

CSS has four locations: Lincoln, Hastings, Auburn, and Imperial, and we have four programs: Family Support Services - which includes food and diaper distribution and short term financial assistance, Refugee Resettlement, Immigration Legal Services, and the St. Gianna Program. Last fiscal year, CSS provided over \$2,300,000 in direct assistance to people in need across southern Nebraska.

Today, I want to speak about how LB78 could positively impact the work we do for women and children fleeing domestic violence.

CSS has been operating a domestic violence home since 2011 called St. Gianna Women's Home. Since that time, we have served 270 women. When you add in their children, we have served 676 people. In 2024 alone, we provided 19,523 "bednights" or nights of shelter.

We provide each family a safe and secure environment where they can deal with the trauma caused by their abuse, and help them to become self-sufficient and learn to develop healthy relationships in the future. We serve any woman experiencing abuse, regardless of their faith background. In addition to housing, we also provide education, employment, and counseling services. The average length of a stay at the home for the women and children we serve is right around one-year.

Beginning in 2023, the program was expanded to include services for individuals or families not living in the home. This assistance can be used for rent to move into a new apartment, transportation to relocate to a different city or state, or to pay rent or utilities at a current residence. We have assisted 51 additional individuals and their families by expanding these services, which are essential for those seeking to rebuild their lives free from domestic violence.

As important as these statistics are, what's most important is real people. Mary is one of the 270 women we have served. She experienced numerous abusive relationships, but her last one was the worst by far. She started with us in 2019, and came to us with almost nothing. Her daughter, who has mild special needs, was struggling in school, and Mary didn't have a job because her abuser didn't allow her to work. Thankfully, she found St. Gianna's. We provided her a safe home, surrounded by people who encouraged her. Little by little, Mary was able to put the pieces of her life back together. We got her counseling and a good job at an insurance company. Her daughter was able to get into a private school that was more equipped to meet her daughter's educational needs, and could flourish in her new environment.

Around two years after Mary moved out of St. Gianna's, she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. We were able to assist her with rental payments and funeral expenses, which allowed Mary to enjoy the little time she had left. As her time grew shorter, it astounded me to speak with her and how she talked about

her daughter. They each had a great deal of peace and confidence, because they lived a process of healing together, and developed a very close relationship. Mary passed away in January of 2023. While we continue to have some contact with her daughter and her adoptive family, it hasn't been easy, but she expresses incredible gratitude for all she and her mom received.

I can't imagine what this process would have been like for Mary and her daughter, if she hadn't received the support and services to rebuild their life. She could have continued to live at the hands of her abuser. Her daughter very likely would have ended up in the custody of her abuser. But securing a safe place to live was the first step on a path that led Mary and her daughter to healing.

For every Mary that we are able to help, we know there are many others we are unable to reach and help because of the lack of housing availability and financial assistance. We see this problem on a regular basis. We strongly believe LB78 will help us—and other agencies like ours—have further resources to make sure we can impact the Mary's of the world, and provide them the peace and healing they deserve.

Thank you for your time today—and please advance LB78 from the Revenue Committee.