



December 20, 2022

To Whom it May Concern:

In the Spring of 2021, the State of South Dakota received a large grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a federal government agency. These federal funds were allocated to the state to support the development of a sustainable Community Health Worker (CHW) workforce in South Dakota. Further, these funds were explicitly earmarked as being preferred for entities that serve individuals who are from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹ It was from these funds The Transformation Project applied for and received a grant managed by the South Dakota Department of Health totalling \$135,747.92.

Our organization was deeply grateful to receive this grant. This funding meant that we would be able to develop a Community Health Worker (CHW) program to meet the needs of South Dakotans who experience disparate health outcomes. The population our organization serves—the transgender, gender non-conforming, and broader LGBTQ2S² community—is widely known to have disproportionately negative health outcomes both in our state and across the nation and is sorely in need of dedicated health services to close the existing disparity. We are the entity they trust to help them navigate through the complexities of the health care and social services systems.

Unfortunately, to our complete shock and dismay, and with no advance warning or discussion from the State of South Dakota, we were sent a “Notice of Termination” via email on Friday, December 16, 2022. This Notice alleged that our organization had “failed to perform [our] obligations under the Contract” and that the contract was terminated effective immediately.

The hours and days following our receipt of this Notice have been, to put it mildly, overwhelming and difficult. We have received multiple media inquiries from national outlets, and have found our organization under intense scrutiny from online publications that peddle falsehoods about transgender people and perpetuate harm and discrimination against them. Though we will not participate in a combative media environment that demeans the people we serve, we do feel it is critical to correct the record of allegations made against us by the State, to clarify the context

1

https://bhwhrsa.gov/funding/apply-grant/faq-community-health-worker-training-program#funding_preferences

² LGBTQ2S is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and two spirit.

in which we find ourselves, and to inform our community of this situation in our own words. To that end, we are sharing this open letter.

Let us be clear: we firmly believe that the termination of our contract with the SD Department of Health was unwarranted and that our organization has remained in compliance with the terms of the contract. We strongly disagree with the Department's assertion that we failed to perform our contractual obligations. We are also deeply concerned by the appearance that the termination of this contract stems not from our actions but as a result of the population we serve. At this time we are reviewing all available options and seeking legal advice in the hopes that we may remedy this circumstance so we may continue serving the transgender and broader LGBTQ2S community in South Dakota.

It is no secret that the entire LGBTQ2S community generally—and the transgender community in particular—face some of the greatest health disparities. Here in South Dakota, the data is stark.³ For example, 53% of LGBTQ youth in South Dakota have seriously considered suicide in the past year; 19% report a suicide attempt in the past year. 75% of LGBTQ youth in South Dakota report experiencing symptoms of anxiety; 58% of this population in our state report symptoms of depression. Despite this, 59% of LGBTQ youth in our state who wanted mental health care could not access that care. In addition, 40% of LGBTQ youth have experienced threat or harm due to their sexual orientation or gender identity and 80% experienced discrimination.

Disparities for this population continue into adulthood.⁴ Studies indicate that 2 in 3 transgender adults worry their health evaluations are affected by their sexual orientation or gender identity, and nearly half of transgender adults report having negative or discriminatory experiences with a health care provider. Further, more than half of transgender adults have avoided needed medical care due to cost, and transgender adults are 4 times as likely as cisgender heterosexual adults to report making at least 1 suicide attempt in their life.

Given these statistics, it has become imperative for our organization to provide services to our community and it is simple to understand why we were so grateful to receive the grant allowing us to develop a CHW program. According to the American Public Health Association, a Community Health Worker (CHW) is “a frontline public health worker who is a trusted member of and/or has an unusually close understanding of the community served. This trusting relationship enables the worker to serve as a liaison/link/intermediary between health/social services and the community to facilitate access to services and improve the quality and cultural competence of service delivery.”

³ The Trevor Project, 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health (South Dakota); <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/The-Trevor-Project-2022-National-Survey-on-LGBTQ-Youth-Mental-Health-by-State-South-Dakota.pdf>

⁴

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/protecting-advancing-health-care-transgender-adult-communities/>

Upon receipt of the grant via the South Dakota Department of Health, The Transformation Project was able to create a staff position for the organization's first-ever CHW. After a thorough search we were able to successfully hire a member of the LGBTQ2S community to serve in this role. This staff member's job was to provide critical services, including:

- Health system navigation and resource coordination;
- Health promotion and coaching in the form of providing information and education to patients that makes positive contributions to their health status, such as cessation of tobacco use, education in the misuse of alcohol or drugs, improvement in nutrition, and improvement of physical fitness;
- Health education that is consistent with established or recognized healthcare standards and is grounded in methods and measures that have been proven effective in avoiding illness and/or lessening its effects, on topics such as control of high blood pressure, immunizations, and prevention of diabetes.

Overall, the CHW program The Transformation Project was implementing under the grant included work that is both vital for the transgender and broader LGBTQ community as well as vital for a healthier South Dakota. This program was created and implemented using best practices in public health and service provision.

To put it simply, we received a grant to establish a CHW program and we did just that. We complied with all aspects of the contract and are heartbroken at what we believe are inaccurate descriptions of our work. We are further devastated because it is patently obvious that the transgender and broader LGBTQ2S community in South Dakota faces health disparities that could be improved under this grant—precisely what was intended in the first place.

Regardless of the ultimate outcome, we remain unwaveringly committed to serving transgender South Dakotans and we will continue to support and empower the community we serve. As the only organization in the state solely serving the transgender community and their families, the Transformation Project remains unwaveringly committed to uphold transgender and LGBTQ2S people in our state who deserve nothing less than the respect and care all communities should enjoy.

Sincerely,

Susan Williams, Executive Director
The Transformation Project
605-610-8579
susan@transformationprojectsd.org