

February 14, 2020

House Corrections and Juvenile Justice Committee  
Attention: Russ Jennings, Chairman

**RE: House Bill No. 2505**

Chairman Jennings and Committee Members:

Good afternoon. My name is Reverend Lee Jost and I have been a youth minister or a senior minister in Johnson County Kansas for over 25 years. In 2011 I went to a training for Strengthening Families Program offered to the community by Johnson County Mental Health. Strengthening Families is an evidence-based program that has been implemented for over nearly 30 years across the nation and has shown to be an effective intervention to reduce substance abuse in the home and increase family cohesion.

Dr. Karol L. Kumpfer developed the original evidence-based SFP 14-session program in 1982 on a National Institute of Drug Abuse grant for substance-abusing parents with children ages 6 to 11 years (SFP6-11). The first program ran in a methadone clinic and focused on giving parents the skills to help their children choose to reject drugs and alcohol. Since 1982 the program has been adapted to serve the unique developmental stages of families with children 0-3, 3-5, 6-11 and 12-18. The curriculum teaches three core skills that are universal for all families: Building strong bonds with your child, equipping families to communicate well and helping families set boundaries for their children.

The program is designed to reach the entire family. The program begins with a family meal, a time for families to sit and eat together. We know that family meals and communication over dinner are in fact a protective factor for families. After dinner, parents attend a parent skills class, and children go to their age appropriate skill class. After an hour of teaching and skill building the families come together to end the night with a half hour to 45 minutes of family practice, a time to practice bond building, communication and setting boundaries in a supervised and facilitated environment.

At the end of the training in 2012, Johnson County Corrections, my church and another sister congregation launched a pilot Strengthening Families program. Since the launch in 2012 our congregations and Juvenile Field Services have completed 14 semesters of Strengthening Families for teens serving over 100 families. I have been a facilitator and am now a facilitator trainer for this program since 2012.

For our first few years of running the program we saw families who were suffering from emotional distance and teens who were disrespectful and rebellious. Most of the parents were at their wits end. Over the course of the 14 weeks we would see families make an effort and quite often see things improve in these families. In general we have seen around 70% of our families complete the program. However in our last few classes we have noticed that percent has dropped. Completion is going down and the willingness of teens to participate in the program exercises is also diminishing.

Today I come to share my story of working with youth who are in our program. For the past year or so, these youth have become increasingly disengaged in our program and their parents are increasingly frustrated. I would like to share the story of one family who came through our program. Mom is a single mom. Her two boys have been involved with the criminal justice system as both youth and now her oldest has a criminal record as an adult. She came through Strengthen Families 2 years ago and during her time she was struggling to keep her boys out of trouble. Her oldest was on probation and house arrest and continued to have friends over to the house, continued to test positive for drugs and continued to leave the house even cutting off his house arrest ankle bracelet.

Mom would come to class and share her experiences and ask why there was not something the authorities could do to help curb this behavior. I would ask the Juvenile Field Service staff who run the program with us, and I was told over and over that there were limited sanctions that could be given to kids like this.

In class, when we would talk about setting limits at home often this youth would say out loud “why worry about it, nothing happens anyway.” He would share how all that happened when he went back to court for new charges was that they would just increase his house arrest time or add programs that he and his family needed to go through.

During group, parents have often expressed that they are held captive by their child’s behaviors. Many of these parents are truly trying, they are making efforts at home, however when a child refuse to begin to modify their behavior, they are responsible for taking their child to more community programs, they are responsible for more time away from other family members. They ask, “how do we set limits with consequences at home and they don’t feel those same limits with the system?”

I know that data, that incarcerating a youth increases the chance that they will continue to cycle in and out of incarceration even into adulthood. However, I am here to express the current system does not provide for some sort of sanction that can reinforce the need for behavior change. I do not come with a specific solution, I come as a voice of the families I serve. There needs to be some sort of sanction that supports families in their efforts to help set boundaries at home. The current system does not provide juveniles a sense of natural consequence from repeatedly violating conditions of probation. Parents that are truly trying do not feel the system helps.

Finally, as an individual who also works with adult offenders in our country, I will say that these juveniles and their parents are not being set up to understand the much stricter adult system. My mom, who had a son coming to group, and continued to act out, her son ended up shortly after turning 18 violating his probation, and picked up a new charge, he found himself in the county jail. The family was in shock, suddenly, a few months after another slap on the wrist as a juvenile, he was now 18 years old and spending time in jail with adults who had been there before. Mom had no communication with him outside of his court appointed attorney.

Our goal of focusing on community-based services is a good goal, however for this story, it the system was perhaps too lenient on this juvenile and he ended up right where we did not want him.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony on this important topic.

Sincerely,

Reverend Lee Jost