

I am here today in support of HR 2699. In Sedgwick County, the CSOs have been serving the child in need of care system since the 1970s. In those nearly fifty years, the CSOs have become an integral and irreplaceable part of the daily operations of juvenile court in Sedgwick County.

When a new case comes before the court for a temporary custody hearing, the CSO is the primary initial point of contact for parents. They collect essential contact information, conduct inquiries into the applicability of the Indian Child Welfare Act, and provide important advisories about parent advocate programs and the requirement of child support. The CSO is the individual uniquely positioned to handle this task. CSOs are the only individuals who are present with access to the Court's electronic databases. Intake workers from the Department for Children and Families (DCF), or its contractor in Sedgwick County St. Francis Ministries, may not even be present at the temporary custody hearing.

Beyond the temporary custody hearing, Court Service Officers remain the primary point of contact for grandparents and foster placements. Under Kansas Statutes, in each and every child in need of care case, a grandparent is entitled to interested party status; however, there are not enough attorneys available for grandparents to receive appointed counsel, and many cannot afford private counsel on their own. The CSO is able to serve as the vital bridge between a grandparent and his or her grandchild – without such a connection, many grandparents may end up disconnected, disengaged or left without an advocate in their grandchild's case. Such a result starkly contrasts with the clearly articulated policies in favor of kinship placement and grandparent rights within the Revised Code for the Care of Children.

Court Service Officers provide regular drug testing for parents at court hearings. Issues of substance abuse are prevalent in Sedgwick County, and are the reason that many children come into care. As an advocate for parents whose children have been removed for substance abuse issues, it is essential to have regular testing and results to draw upon in assessing my client's continued stability, sobriety, and ability to parent their children. These test results are often essential to a court's decision on issues presented in court. Judges may condition a parent receiving unsupervised visitation, or even reintegration with his or her children on the result of a urinalysis test conducted at court. Removing the ability to gain that information will have an adverse effect on representation by attorneys, and informed decision-making by the judiciary.

Court Service Officers also provide assistance to parents who are incarcerated. A parent who is in custody has a right to be present at his or her child's hearings in the child in need of care case. If a parent is recently arrested and is in the Sedgwick County jail, or has been moved to a new facility in KDOC custody, it is at times difficult to locate and transport those individuals. Transport orders are required. The CSOs both locate those individuals in custody and facilitate transport orders. This service is essential in protecting the legal rights available to parents who are in custody.

Finally, and most importantly, the Court Service Officer provides accountability for DCF and its agents. The Sedgwick County District Attorney's office will file nearly 700 new child in need of care cases in 2019. DCF reported in July 2019 that in Sedgwick County alone, an average of 1,136 children are in an out of home placement at the end of each month – that is nearly 500

more children than the second highest county, and is greater than the number of kids in most counties by a factor of ten. Every child in Sedgwick County has a specific CSO assigned to their case who serves as an important liaison between the service providers and the Court. They observe progress and prepare court reports identifying important issues for the Court and all counsel's review. Court Service Officers are the individuals who catch errors such as lapses of mental health care, failure to follow through for educational support, and failure to prepare requisite tribal enrollment paperwork. Without the accountability provided by CSOs, the quality of services and support received by families and children in care would dramatically decrease. The issues within DCF are well-known and well-documented. It is tragic that as a result of issues within DCF that the names of Lucas Hernandez, Anthony Bunn, and Evan Brewer (among others), have appeared in headlines in Sedgwick County. The safety and well-being of Kansas children and families is something for which no amount of money or fiscal savings could substitute.