



January 31, 2022

Jennifer Adhima, Executive Director
Kansas Head Start Association
Written-only Proponent testimony for HB 2525
House Committee on Children and Seniors

Chairperson Concannon and members of the Committee:

Thank you for holding a hearing to address House Bill 2525. I am the Executive Director of the Kansas Head Start Association and I am writing in support of this bill and the positive impact it will have on Kansas children and their families. The Kansas Head Start Association is the voice for the Head Start and Early Head Start programs in Kansas that provide early childhood education services to nearly 7,000 vulnerable young children and pregnant women across Kansas, many of who rely on food assistance and/or child care assistance to provide stability for their families.

HB 2525 will address restrictions in access to critical family-strengthening programs: food assistance and child care assistance. Kansas is unique in that it requires those seeking these types of assistance to comply with child support enforcement. While many families do cooperate with the child support program, there are some who are reluctant to seek these supports. Reasons for reluctance can include fear of upsetting the non-custodial caregiver who could be emotionally or physically abusive; existing alternative support arrangements that meet their family needs; or the inability of the non-custodial parent to comply with child support enforcement orders because of unstable employment.

Unfortunately, we know that children suffer when families cannot access or are denied these critical supports. Children who are hungry do not experience optimal growth during a critical period of their development. They cannot concentrate in their preschool or in school when they are hungry and often fall behind academically. Food assistance helps fill the gap between the cost of quality food and the budget of a low-income household; and children should not go hungry because their parent is reluctant or fearful to access these services.

Likewise, a parent's ability to work, contribute to the economy, and achieve a level of financial stability for their family is compromised when they cannot access child care assistance because of the child support compliance requirement. When children attend unstable or low-quality child care, it is often the child's safety and development that is put at risk. It is also incredibly stressful to be a parent who needs to work or attend class but find yourself unable to focus because you are worried about the environment in which you just left your child. This type of ongoing stress coupled with living in persistent poverty can lead to toxic levels of stress in a household, which can ultimately affect the short- and long-term growth and development of children in that home.



The other critical component of HB 2525 that will benefit Kansas children and families is the removal of lifetime limits to child care assistance and the current work requirements for parents pursuing training and education. There are many Kansans who would like to achieve their educational goals in order to better their family circumstances, but the current system is only contributing to additional barriers that can make these goals feel impossible. We know that higher educational achievement increases potential earning power and can improve financial stability for these families. We also know that reducing poverty levels in Kansas homes increases the likelihood that children will have healthier lives, better educational outcomes, and a greater chance of being financially stable themselves.

Kansas families are currently facing insurmountable stress and challenges to their family stability and well-being. The number of children involved in the Kansas foster care system is just one indicator of this. Public policy should not continue to contribute to the number of barriers facing families and their children but should offer solutions that can positively impact their lives. The Kansas Head Start Association believes that the provisions of HB 2525 are critical changes that can be easily implemented to allow Kansas families and their children a better opportunity to thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding HB 2525. I am happy to serve as a resource to the Committee on this matter should you have further questions.

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer Adhima
Executive Director
jadhima@ksheadstart.org