



Written-only Testimony in Support of HB 2525

Submitted by Dr. Linda Bass, LCMFT
President, KVC Kansas

January 31, 2022, House Committee on Children and Seniors

On behalf of the nonprofit organization KVC Kansas, I'd like to ask for your support for HB 2525. This is a critical bill that will expand Kansas families' access to childcare and food assistance. It benefits all of us as citizens when the children in our communities have the food and the care they need. We can all agree that no child should go hungry, and no parent should be unable to access affordable childcare when it is needed for them to work.

Just a couple months ago, Dr. Henry Puls, a pediatrician at Children's Mercy in Kansas City, published a new study. His research which was published in the American Academy of Pediatrics' journal *Pediatrics* is relevant to the legislation in front of you today because it shows that state spending on poverty really pays off for kids.

Dr. Puls found that for every additional \$1,000 that states spend on federal, state, and local benefit programs per person living in poverty, there is a 4% reduction in substantiated child abuse, a 2% reduction in foster care placements and about an 8% reduction in fatalities. The anti-poverty investment also offsets long-term health costs by billions. (Sources: [State Spending on Poverty Really Pays Off for Kids: Study](#) and [State Spending on Public Benefit Programs and Child Maltreatment](#).) In other words, when we make sure children have their basic needs met and do not grow up in poverty, they experience fewer incidents of child abuse and fewer of those children will be placed in foster care.

As many of you know, KVC Kansas is a nonprofit that consists of about 450 professionals. We are headquartered in Olathe in the greater Kansas City area and have 10 offices spread throughout the Eastern half of the state. We work to strengthen families, prevent child abuse and neglect, and help both children and adults achieve mental health wellness. For 25 years, KVC has provided foster care case management on behalf of the State, which means we have direct responsibility for children in state custody. We also recruit and support foster families and relative caregivers. KVC Kansas directly supports nearly 1,100 Kansas homes caring for children in foster care.

Each day, our team members are on the frontlines caring for children who are in foster care due to abuse, neglect or other serious family challenges. We also provide services to their parents

and guardians, most of whom are working to overcome challenges, safely reunify with their children, and become the parents they have always dreamed of being.

According to the Kansas Department for Children and Families' website, 6,517 children are in foster care. Each year, approximately 3,300 children are removed from their homes and placed into Kansas foster care. (Monthly data is at <http://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/PPS/Pages/FosterCareDemographicReports.aspx>)

Did you know that approximately half of the children who enter foster care do so not because of physical or sexual abuse, but because of physical neglect or because their family is in need of assessment and services? For example, since July 1, 2021, over 200 children have entered foster care due to physical neglect (*defined as failure to provide for a child's basic survival needs, such as nutrition, clothing, shelter, hygiene, and medical care*), which is one of 29 removal reasons tracked by the state. While poverty and neglect are different, it's important to understand that poverty is a risk factor for neglect and makes it more difficult for parents to meet their children's needs.

This bill is important for Kansas children and families not only because it means they will be able to access the food and childcare they need, but also because it has the power to safely prevent children from entering foster care. Any time we can prevent even one child or one family from experiencing the traumatic pain and separation of foster care, it is worth it. This bill won't just prevent one or two children from entering foster care. Rather, it has the potential to safely prevent hundreds of Kansas children from entering foster care this year and in every future year. This is because it helps parents access the food and childcare they need to keep their children safe and healthy.

While foster care prevention is important because of how it affects children in our state, it's also important for the integrity of our foster care system itself. While the number of Kansas children in foster care has declined during the COVID pandemic, there are still far too many children in state custody. According to the KIDS Count Data Book from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the national average is 6 children per 1,000 children in foster care. But in Kansas, we have almost twice as many children in foster care – we have 11 children in foster care per 1,000 children. This reality that there are too many Kansas children in foster care is one of the core reasons that our state foster care system is under more stress. For example, in the early 2000s, our state easily met and exceeded the federal standard for ensuring placement stability for children in foster care. This means we made sure that children stayed in the same home and did not move often. Unfortunately, our state is having more difficulty meeting this federal performance standard due to the high number of children in foster care.

This bill will keep more Kansas kids fed and more Kansas families together. When more people have access to these basic supports like food and childcare, then families who may be separated in part due to financial hardship will be able to stay safely together.

Please support this important legislation as it will have a tremendously positive impact on Kansas children and families you represent.