

January 31, 2022

Re: HB 2525

Cecilia Douglass

Private Citizen

Garden City

Finney County, KS

Chairperson Concannon and Members of the House Committee on Children and Seniors,

I'm writing in support of HB 2525 as a private citizen who has been adversely impacted by the current laws preventing access to food assistance and child care assistance without the authorization of a child support enforcement order. While I understand the states position to hold absent parents accountable for the expense of their children, it also opens the family up to unsavory situations. For example, my two older children are now teenagers. When they were younger, I was able to access food assistance and when applying for child care assistance the state would initiate a child support enforcement order. At the time the bill did not limit access to food assistance and a child support enforcement order made sense with their absent father. Though efforts to collect child support were understandable, I have received minimal financial support as a result of the current order. It is too easy for absent parents to obtain day-labor employment where often paid under the table, or to jump to another job when the state receives updates on employment, as was my case. It's also very hard to enforce when the absent parent is in jail or rehabilitation. Though my children required food and stability regardless. I was left filling in the gaps that seemed to continue growing as the cost of living remains on the rise. While raising my two older children, it was imperative that we receive those monthly food benefits to keep healthy food such as fruits, vegetables, oatmeal, and easy to prepare snacks.

Fast-forward to 2017 when I was pregnant with my third child and facing it entirely alone after his father abandoned his responsibilities. The abandonment turned out to be a blessing to our family. This individual suffered immensely from mental health issues and refused treatment on a number of occasions. This created a very unhealthy living environment for my two oldest children. My children complained of emotional abuse, some of which was escalated in my absence. I witnessed him fight for split custody of his own child simply to "get out of paying child support". Watching him interact with his child behind closed doors was enough to convince me that I needed better for my son. I was determined to protect him at all costs. When his father left I made the decision to find a job with benefits and better pay. Though this was a step in the right direction, it wasn't enough to offset the loss of our second income. I lost my vehicle, neglected regularly paying rent, and dodged disconnect notice after disconnect notice for the first two years of my son's life. I attempted to apply for food assistance in 2017 following the birth of my

son. Immediately I was informed of the child support enforcement order that would be required for not just child care assistance, but now food assistance. Because of the emotional turmoil my older two children experienced at the hands of my ex and his family, I made the decision not to allow him to have any influence over my son that he wasn't willing to fight for. I knew accessing food assistance would be temporary as I reestablished myself in my new career. I had contributed to the same system more consistently than either of the men responsible for the creation of my children. I felt like the same system I contributed to was telling me I wasn't allowed to need assistance without furthering the trauma my children would be exposed to as a result of said child support enforcement order.

Child support enforcement orders often come with parenting time. How does the state intend to protect children from abusive non-residential parents who otherwise would have no desire to be a part of their upbringing? This then creates hostile relations that strain the system further. In my case, I know his father would hire an attorney and fight for split custody simply to avoid paying child support. While I recognize the financial benefit that might mean for the state, it puts my son at risk. My son is well on his way to developing the self confidence to interact with his peers, to trust adults, to build strong relationships. These are all steps to produce high-contributing members of society. When you expose a child to emotional neglect or emotional abuse, you're setting the system up to fail that child. We know there are long lasting impacts on children stemming from emotional trauma. It's plagued generations already. My ultimate goal as a mother is to protect my children, provide for my children, and help them develop the skills they need to be independent, self-sufficient, contributing members of society. As I look at my two older children who both hold part-time jobs, maintain passing grades, participate in school athletics, and have a desire to help those around them, I realize I'm capable of doing this alone. It would be nice to have had access to the food assistance we needed in the first two years of my son's life. I sometimes worry if I somehow failed him by feeding him peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for days on end waiting on that next paycheck. But when I see him shouting out colors, or identify vehicles, shapes, and observe his curiosity of the world around him.... I see we are a family built on resiliency. And I take a moment of silence for those families who aren't as fortunate as we are.

Thank you for continued support of families across Kansas. I trust my government to work towards a brighter future for children who weren't born into ideal circumstances. Afterall, those children could become our next lawmakers.

Best regards,

Cecilia Douglass

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