

Good afternoon, Chair Concannon, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Minority Member Ousley, and House Committee on Child Welfare and Foster Care members. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option. My name is Alexandria Ware, and I am the legal and policy tri-chair for the SOUL implementation team. My purpose here today is to express support and urgency for HB 2536. As a current foster parent and person with lived expertise in the Kansas Foster Care system, I understand young people in Kansas need SOUL Family.

Soul Family is like a warm hug for kids in foster care. When I was in foster care and couldn't be with my real family, I found comfort in being part of a community that felt like home. Soul Family creates the opportunity for young people to design their own supportive network, like a family we design to help us grow and be happy.

Having grown-ups around is super important for all kids, especially those in foster care. Luckily, I got to be close to an elder in my adoptive family's community, whom I call my Papa. He was like a stable rock, giving me love and support beyond what my adoptive family could provide. He didn't judge me; he just loved me and showed up when I needed him the most.

Even though my Papa wasn't legally my family, he was my actual caregiver. He took me shopping, supported me in school, and cheered me on. Soul Family is an excellent idea because it recognizes the importance of these unique connections and helps make them official.

I want people to understand that kids in foster care, like me, should have a say in who we want in our lives. Soul Family isn't just about two parents; it's about having a whole community that cares. My adoptive parents gave me a place to live, but it was my Papa who gave me emotional support and taught me important life lessons, like finding joy in everything I do.

I urge everyone to support HB 2536 because it can make a massive difference for young people like the ones I mentor who spend time in day centers or bouncing from one place to another at night. Data from the most recent Fostering Youth Transitions report indicates that 64% of Black youth and 47% of Hispanic youth in Kansas foster care experience four or more placements. These placement changes often come with costly disruptions in education, medical care, social

connections, and more. Additionally, in Kansas, 71% of Black youth and 64% of Hispanic youth will exit the foster care system without achieving the legal connection of permanency, a family to rely on for a lifetime. Our young people need your support now more than ever.

Your support of Soul Family helps ensure the law recognizes these essential community relationships. It's not about making rules for love but about creating laws that support what kids in foster care need – a community of caring people to guide us through life's big moments. Passing HB 2536 can be crucial in turning this vision into reality. Soul Family ensures that love and relationships are not just words but are legally recognized and supported. It's like saying, 'Hey, it takes a whole community to help all kids thrive!' Support HB 2536 and help create a system that genuinely cares for the well-being of young people in foster care."

In Community and Gratitude,

Alexandria Ware, M.S., LEx