

January 24, 2024

Sierra Jones
Verbal Proponent Testimony
House Committee on Child Welfare and Foster Care

Good afternoon, Chair Concannon, Ranking Member Ousely, and Members of the House Committee on Child Welfare and Foster Care:

My name is Sierra Jones and I am a birth parent who had the privilege of fostering my biological child for the last two years that she was in care. I am writing today to speak **in support of House Bill 2536, the SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option.**

While my family's experience may be unique within foster care, it shows just how flexible our child welfare system can be and how sometimes those unique circumstances turn out to be what is actually in the best interest of a child as was the case with my child who FLOURISHED during her last two years in care. When my daughter came to me at age 16, she was pregnant and about to enter her senior year in high school with only six credits. In the two years that followed, she gave birth to her child, graduated, got her first and second jobs, and bought her first car. She also is a youth advocate for Progeny, an organization that advocates for change within the Juvenile Justice System.

Similarly, SOUL Family offers a unique approach to addressing some of the greatest needs in the Kansas foster care system, including the need to decrease the time children are in care and the number of children who "AGE OUT" of our foster care system with NO PLACE to call home.

My child aged out in September of 2023, and though I am and always will be her mother, on paper she is technically an orphan. I know it may not seem important to most, but until labeled an orphan, you nor I can understand what that feels like or does to a child mentally and emotionally. We, as the community, have a responsibility when it comes to children in general (not just children in care) to do what is in the BEST INTEREST of a child. That includes their mental well-being, as well as their physical well-being.

I support this bill because it embodies exactly what my child and I were looking for in our child welfare system. When I was in the Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC) and unable to do what was required of me, SOUL would have been a great alternative for my child to avoid placement in 20+ foster homes within a matter of 3 years.

It would have prevented my child from going through the mental anguish that drove her to suicidal thoughts and ideations to the point of being admitted to a psych ward. SOUL offers just the type of thing that we need to turn our child welfare system around for the better. It gives the child the HOPE that is so often snatched from them after lengthy stays in foster homes with strangers and that HOPE is a driving force. It was that HOPE that kept me showing up to my child's court dates even after the judge told me I would NEVER get my child again. It was HOPE that pushed my child to reach out and find her family regardless of where in Kansas a foster care agency placed her. It was HOPE that eventually opened up a DOOR/OPPORTUNITY for me to get my child back in my home once again. HOPE...That is what SOUL offers that none of the other 3 permanency options offer, but desperately need.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME

SIERRA SAMONE JONES - A Mother