

January 24, 2024

Kassi McDowell  
Verbal Proponent Testimony  
House Committee on Child Welfare and Foster Care

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

My name is Kassi McDowell, and I am a tri-chair of the SOUL Family practice and implementation team. I am also a person with lived experience honored to be here today, speaking with you **in support of House Bill 2536, the SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option.**

Statistics show that 62% of youth in foster care emancipate or “age out” of the system and only 36% will actually reach legal permanency. Additionally, 24% will be homeless at least once and 1 in 5 will be homeless at age 18. In comparison to their peers, these young adults are more likely to be arrested, serve jail time, and struggle with addiction. I am coming here today having been one of those young people.

While 89% of Kansas students graduate high school, the percentage drops to 59.3% for students in care and 31% for students who age out of the Kansas foster care system. Soul Family provides educational and financial support, family and community that makes academic success more likely for these students.

Reflecting on my journey with the child welfare system both as a youth, and as a parent, sometimes it was not easy, and a lot of times I felt trapped in thinking I was never going to be able to accomplish anything.

Young people who are currently in the system may also feel trapped and as though they have no voice in what happens to them. Additionally, they have experienced trauma, with many having never felt a sense of belonging, a key factor in future success.

If House Bill 2536, the SOUL Family Permanency Option, is passed it will give young people in Kansas a permanency option that truly prioritizes their voice and gives them a say in where they are placed and what “permanency” means for them. It will also allow for a meaningful sense of belonging with their family and community and a better chance of future success.

I appreciate you taking the time to listen to our testimonies today about how far we have come through such challenging times in our lives. I hope you can open your hearts and minds to make this permanency option a reality for Kansas youth, who may otherwise emancipate, or age out of the foster care system without having a forever family.

Family means everything.

Thank you so much for your time today and have a blessed day.