



# DCF Legislative Testimony

**March 6, 2024**

**TESTIMONY OF:** Laura Howard, Secretary, Department for Children and Families

**TESTIMONY ON:** House Bill 2785 – Kansas Office of Early Childhood

Chair Tarwater and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 2785 creating the Kansas Office of Early Childhood. This bill will redesignate the Kansas Children's Cabinet as the Kansas Office of Early Childhood and will consolidate early childhood programs under that entity. I stand in strong support of this bill.

This bill carries out the intentions of the Kansas Early Childhood Taskforce that was established by Governor Laura Kelly in January 2023 through Executive Order 23-01. Programmatically, the Task Force recommended that the following categories of programs ultimately be co-located in the new unified entity:

- Child Care (including licensing, subsidy and lead agency role for federal Child Care and Development Fund).
- Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund
- Home Visiting Programs; and
- Early Head Start/HeadStart.

Preschool programs through the Kansas State Department of Education, health care programs, and child welfare programs would not move. From a DCF perspective, the lead role for the federal Child Care and Development fund would shift to the Office of Early Childhood, including the associated funding for childcare subsidy and childcare quality investments. Also transferring would be Early Head Start and the Head Start collaboration office, and a number of home visiting programs.

Each day one hears stories in Kansas and nationally about the critical role that available, affordable childcare plays on family well-being, on the ability of individuals to enter and stay in the workforce, and on the business sector's ability to employ adequate staff. Increasingly, the lack of available and affordable childcare limits economic growth. Today, there is not a focused Kansas entity charged with addressing this strategic challenge. Even the most well-intentioned siloed efforts will not allow Kansas to address these challenges in the most robust and effective ways that is necessary to make sufficient progress.

While there have been important efforts to coordinate across the primary state agencies, these coordinating efforts only go so far. And they do little to make the bureaucracy friendly to providers, families, and businesses. There are many benefits to the unification of these programs into this Office of Early Childhood:

- Reducing the bureaucracy and confusion in accessing services (*e.g., home visiting*).
- Streamlining processes and reducing duplication of work (*e.g., licensing/subsidy provider*).
- Optimizing the use of different funding streams; and
- A focused point of Accountability.

Thank you for the chance to provide this testimony. Leaders in states across the spectrum have taken steps to consolidate early childhood services. I ask that you join them through supporting this legislation creating the Kansas Office of Early Childhood.