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**Testimony by Rabbi Moti Rieber in Opposition to HB 2627, Reorganizing the public assistance statute**  
House Committee on Welfare Reform, Rep. Francis Awerkamp, chair  
February 1, 2024

Mr. Chair, Members of the Committee:

My name is Rabbi Moti Rieber, and I serve as executive director of Kansas Interfaith Action, a statewide, multi-faith issue-advocacy organization that “puts faith into action” by educating, engaging and advocating on behalf of people of faith and the public regarding critical justice issues. We are the advocacy partner of several of the mainline denominations in Kansas, including the Central States Synod of the ELCA Lutheran Church, the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas, the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference on the United Church of Christ, and the Mercy and Justice Team of the Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church, as well as dozens of congregations and thousands of individual people of faith and conscience throughout Kansas. It is in this capacity that I submit testimony in opposition to HB 2627.

When KIFA was established in 2016, almost the first bill we testified on was as opposition to HB 2600, the expansion of the so-called HOPE Act. In that testimony, we quoted extensively from the United Methodist Church’s “Principles of Welfare Reform,” adopted in 1996 and amended and readopted in 2004 and 2008, which can be found in the Book of Resolutions. Some of these principles include: having poverty reduction as a central goal; adequate state and federal funding for welfare; making sure that former welfare recipients receive at least as much from working as they received from welfare; not imposing time limits on people who are complying with the rules of the program; and making sure the state provides access to counseling, legal assistance, and information on eligibility for child support, job training and placement, medical care, affordable housing, food programs, and education.

The current statute clearly does not comport with these principles. The statute, and the way Kansas has pursued “welfare reform,” is based on the assumption that all that is needed to move people from poverty to self-sufficiency is the holding of a job, without any regard to how much that job pays or how to access affordable healthcare (not available with most low-paid jobs), childcare, or housing. Strict income and asset limits; strict time and income eligibility limits; and onerous application and eligibility processes mean that many people who are eligible for these programs do not have access to them: in 2019, for instance, for every 100 Kansas families in poverty, only 9 received cash assistance from TANF.

And we have seen the results, including a direct correlation between TANF caseloads dropping and the number of reports of abuse and neglect, and placement in foster care going up.<sup>1</sup> Many of the problems in our foster care system can be traced back to the implementation of the restrictions on work and family assistance contained in this statute.

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<sup>1</sup> Fox, Madeline. “KU Study Indicates Link Between Kansas Welfare Restrictions, Foster Care Case Increase.” KCUR. December 15, 2017. <http://www.kcur.org/post/ku-study-indicates-link-between-kansas-welfare-restrictions-foster-care-case-increase#stream/0>

Simply forcing people off of work and family supports does not reduce poverty, and Kansas' statute does not cover or even allow for the things that would make the transition from working-poor to self-sufficiency possible. Yet in virtually every case where the state has been given an option, it has taken the most restrictive one:

- We are one of only nine states with child support cooperation related disqualifications in the SNAP program, which research shows do significant harm with no benefit.
- We are one of only eight states that operate mandatory employment and training programs, which lead to otherwise eligible people being kicked out of the program. This leads to “false positives” where the rolls decline, but not due to better outcomes.
- We are one of only nine states that have failed to implement Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility, which would allow seniors and families living on low incomes to build assets through savings, something that reduces poverty.<sup>2</sup>

Since the chairman has decided to open this bill to reorganization, it gives this committee and this legislature the opportunity to fix some of the most egregious excesses of this statute. Here are three suggestions, which could be considered “low-hanging fruit”:

- Removing the modified ban on Kansans with drug-related felonies from ever receiving food assistance and thus allowing them to get back to stability. This bill, which has bipartisan support, was referred to this committee last year but remains unheard;
- Raising the TANF lifetime limit to the federal maximum of 60 months rather than our restrictive, inadequate 24 months; and
- Providing new parents with 12 months to care for their children without being subject to the TANF work requirement, rather than our cruel three months.

These changes could be implemented without undermining the underlying act, pursuing an approach based on helping people to succeed rather than looking at declining enrollment numbers as itself proof of success.

Reorganizing this statute without addressing some of its most damaging provisions is only rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, if only poor people were on that ship. You have an opportunity to use what we've learned from these past few years and finetune this legislation so that it actually does what is intended - help people move from poverty to self-sufficiency. If you take that opportunity, I would be happy to support the bill. Until then, I urge you to vote it down and try again.

Thank you for your attention.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snaps-broad-based-categorical-eligibility-supports-working-families-and>