

Testimony of Nykia Gatson

March 6, 2024

Verbal Testimony in Support of HB 2536
Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare

Chairwoman Gossage and members of the Committee:

My name is Nykia Gatson, and I am honored to serve as one of the legal and policy tri-chairs for the SOUL implementation team. I extend my heartfelt gratitude for the opportunity to address you today regarding the SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option. Additionally, I approach this space not only as a professional but also with a deep understanding of lived experience. I wish to share why I am an ardent supporter of this transformative option:

1. A Diverse Approach to Permanency: Foster care is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Many young people enter the system for different reasons, often stemming from either state intervention or their parents relinquishing their rights due to unfortunate circumstances. Consequently, many youths experience a disconnect from their familial roots. This is precisely why we need the SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option—a pathway that can be uniquely tailored to everyone’s circumstances. It opens the door to a vision beyond the conventional norms dictated by current laws and policies.

Reflecting on my own journey, I entered the system at an age where I was on the verge of aging out of care, having lost both my parents. I had limited family support due to the dual impact of my incarceration at the juvenile correctional complex and subsequently transition into the child welfare system. At 16, I could have greatly benefited from DCF's support in exploring kinship connections with relatives or community members who felt

like home. There were individuals I could have envisioned staying with, outside the realm of independent living. Unfortunately, I always felt trapped in a "circle of transition" that seemed never-ending. The focus was primarily on transitioning, not on establishing permanency.

2. The Importance of an Extended Network of Support: Every young person deserves the chance to experience normalcy and the opportunity to thrive, unburdened by the state's preconceived notions of what a family should be. It is crucial to actively engage young individuals in discussions about their family connections and honor those who have been a part of their lives even before their entry into the system. Empowering young people to have a say in shaping their own concept of home is vital. In my case, the loss of both my parents should have been met with support to explore my extended family network for available options.

Maintaining proximity to loved ones is vital because it ensures that young individuals are not forgotten or abandoned. Someone should have been there to support me when I aged out, but no plan was in place, and I found myself homeless multiple times, navigating two systems that failed to take responsibility for my situation. My hope is that no other young person must endure such abandonment.

Child welfare is a complex system, and we cannot generalize the needs of children and youth within it. It must be highly customized to achieve permanency. SOUL Family offers this possibility. Young people should not be distanced from their families, as this often leads to a sense of being forgotten. Moreover, it severs vital ties to their culture, beliefs, and traditions. It is imperative that we prioritize practices within the system that

prevent young individuals from slipping through the cracks. To create a more effective system, we must return to our communities and empower agencies within them to provide resources to families during times of hardship. Supporting families within their own communities is essential.

In conclusion, I hope that you leave today with the understanding that I view SOUL Family as a necessary option—one that has the potential to enhance the well-being of young adults in Kansas foster care. I believe that, as a permanency option, SOUL will serve young people in ways that current options do not, with a focus on community and amplifying youth voices. I firmly believe that, with sufficient support and resources, SOUL Family upholds the values of young people and their right to thrive. Every young person in Kansas deserves a home where they are valued, uplifted, fully cared for, and accepted as their authentic selves. SOUL Family could have been an option for me, and my hope is that no young person ever experiences a life where they have no place to call home.

Thank you.