

Testimony to the Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee on
HB2578
March 18, 2024

Madam Chairwoman and members of the Committee, my name is Robbin Cole. I am the Chief Executive Officer of Pawnee Mental Health Services. I appreciate this opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 2578.

Pawnee is a licensed Community Mental Health Center (CMHC) and a licensed Substance Use Treatment Center. We are provisionally certified as a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC). Pawnee serves ten counties in northcentral Kansas including Riley, Geary, Pottawatomie, Marshall, Clay, Republic, Washington, Mitchell, Jewell, and Cloud. Pawnee provides services 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year regardless of ability to pay.

Pawnee serves counties which fall into four different population density classifications as determined by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE): semi-urban (2), densely settled rural (1), rural (6) and frontier (1). Pawnee Mental Health Services operates out of sixteen locations in these ten counties.

Pawnee was a part of the second cohort of Kansas CMHCs that were provisionally certified as CCBHCs. Our provisional certification was effective July 1, 2023. We are preparing for our full certification site review April 1-3.

The biggest share of Pawnee's revenues comes from fees-for-services. Medicaid is Pawnee's largest fee-for-service payor. After nearly two decades of unchanged Medicaid rates, Pawnee's ability to recruit and retain staff to meet the needs of the communities we serve was challenged due to our inability to offer competitive wages and salaries. The pandemic further exacerbated the issue.

The additional financial resources made available through an enhanced PPS (prospective payment system) rate have dramatically improved our ability to recruit and retain staff. Since being provisionally certified, our agency has grown from an average of 260 to an average of 310 employees. This growth has occurred throughout the service area, not only in Manhattan but also in Concordia, Clay Center, Wamego, Junction City and Marysville. Many positions that had been open since February of 2022 and were filled once we were able to implement the salary increases associated with CCBHC.

CCBHC and the market competitive salaries have cut recruiting time for all positions across the agency. For example, before CCBHC it would take 5 months to find an RN. We were able to fill our last RN opening within a week. While there are still challenges in our rural communities, we are finally seeing progress in filling those vacancies. Vacancies in our semi-urban communities typically last less than 1-2 months. Before CCBHC, it could take up to 6 months to find someone willing to take a position, in which time other staff had left due to burnout. Enough cannot be said about the

difference between recruiting before and after CCBHC. Our turnover rate has dropped from 55% in 2022 to just 6.5% in 2024 and trending to stay under 10%.

It's not just the wages and salaries though, clinicians are excited at the opportunity to practice whole person health, to use integrated models of care, and to learn and implement more and more evidence-based practices in their work, such as IPS (Individual Placement Supports), Mobile Crisis and Assertive Community Treatment (ACT). Happy and engaged staff make for engaged clients who make for an organization that is better engaged in serving our community.

Local businesses are thrilled about the new and improved services Pawnee can offer the community and their staff, including Pawnee's EAP program, and high-quality community trainings like Mental Health First Aid, crisis de-escalation, and Question, Persuade and Refer (QPR) suicide prevention training. None of these enhanced initiatives would have been possible without the opportunities provided by CCBHC to increase our direct service and training staff.

All said, we are still getting our sea legs. With increased staff and program growth comes increased facility, equipment, and technology costs. Pawnee has not yet realized the full financial benefits of the increased PPS rates and continues to operate at narrow margins.

HB 2758 allows only licensed CMHCS to be certified as CCBHCs. Not forever, but for now. No other provider network in the state is better positioned to provide the services required of CCBHC. It is important to allow the CMHCs which are transitioning to CCBHC status to stabilize under the new model and be fully operational before adding additional providers, resulting in the duplication of services at additional cost to the state.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today. I stand for questions.

Robbin Cole, CEO
Pawnee Mental Health Services