Chairman Lewis, Vice Chair Resman, Ranking Minority Member Schlingensiepen and Members of the House Committee on Corrections and Juvenile Justice:

KVC Kansas is a foster care case management provider, child placing agency, outpatient behavioral health services provider and residential treatment provider. KVC Kansas has been a provider of care for the most vulnerable Kansans for more than 50 years. We are the contracted foster care case management provider for the Department for Children and Families (DCF) in catchment areas 3 and 6, serving Johnson, Douglas, Shawnee and several surrounding rural counties extending to the Southern Nebraska border.

Thank you for the opportunity to present proponent testimony for HB2329, which increases the placement of juvenile offenders in non-foster care home beds and youth residential facilities, with the provision that the Secretary of Corrections pay for the associated costs. As a child welfare case management provider working closely with both juvenile offenders and youth who have experienced abuse and neglect, I believe these measures are critical in addressing two key issues: ensuring the safety and wellbeing of both juvenile offenders and abused or neglected children and enhancing the effectiveness of our juvenile justice system.

Impact of Juvenile Justice Reform on Kansas Foster Care System

Significant steps forward in Kansas' efforts to reform our juvenile justice system have occurred over the past nine years, and the impact on the foster care system cannot be understated. Since implementation of SB367, we have seen a shift toward diversion and community-based solutions, yet the development of prevention and the general service array is insufficient to meet the current need. As a result, one unintended consequence of this reform has been an increased strain on the foster care system. Juvenile offenders, particularly those who are placed in foster care due to their involvement with the justice system, have created safety challenges for the youth in foster care who have been exposed to abuse and neglect.

Juvenile offenders, especially those with histories of violent behavior, can have a detrimental impact on the stability and safety of the foster care placements in which they are placed. This creates a cycle of instability not only for the offenders themselves but also for the other vulnerable youth placed within these homes. Foster homes report incidents of aggression or criminal behavior from youth offenders placed in their homes. These behaviors, which can include violent outbursts and threats, increase the risk of trauma for other children in the system and place foster parents under considerable strain.

Staff are now required to serve not only youth in foster care who have experienced abuse and neglect but also those involved in the juvenile justice system – a population most staff have not been trained to support through their social work and related degree education, and ongoing training remains insufficient. This additional population and insufficient training have led to a rise in staff injuries and increased turnover. Staff retention, already a challenge in child welfare, has reached a critical point, with many professionals leaving the field entirely, citing concerns for their safety at work. Despite KVC's commitment to staff engagement, a culture rooted in connection and safety, as well as achieving an Indeed Work Wellbeing score of 82, outperforming Indeed's list of top 100 for profit Work Wellbeing companies, the concerns detailed above continue to have a significant impact on professionals in child welfare.

Safety Concerns of Serving Juvenile Offenders in the Foster Care System

Safety is a paramount concern in our foster care system, especially when juvenile offenders who have committed violent offenses are often placed in the same environments as youth who have already suffered abuse and neglect due to a lack of suitable placements. Juvenile justice reform is correlated with increased incidents involving violence and aggression in foster homes. These incidents include altercations between juvenile offenders and non-offender children, and violent actions directed toward foster parents.

Placing youth with violent criminal histories in the same homes as abused and neglected children only exacerbates the trauma for both groups. Youth who have experienced abuse and neglect are already at a high risk of developing emotional, behavioral and psychological issues. Placing child abuse victims with juvenile offenders who are in need of intensive intervention can compound these issues, leading to further mental health challenges and, in some cases, an increased risk of reoffending for the juvenile offenders themselves. The trauma experienced by children in these settings is severe and can perpetuate a cycle of violence and dysfunction.

HB2329 is a critical response to this challenge, as it would increase the placement options for juvenile offenders in facilities designed to address their specific needs. Non-foster care home beds and youth residential facilities provide an environment that is more appropriate for juvenile offenders. These facilities offer more intensive supervision, specialized educational services, mental health care and behavioral interventions designed specifically for youth engaged in criminogenic behavior. These placements would allow Kansas to better serve juvenile offenders and ensure the safety and wellbeing of all children in the system.

Conclusion

The Kansas child welfare system is facing significant challenges as a result of the intersection between juvenile justice and foster care. While SB367 marked a positive shift toward reform, it has also highlighted the pressing need for alternative placement options for juvenile offenders. HB2329 will help address these challenges by ensuring that Kansas has appropriate facilities and programs in place for juvenile offenders and providing for the safety and wellbeing of all children in the foster care system.

I urge the Committee to support this bill as it is a crucial step in improving safety, rehabilitation and future outcomes for Kansas' youth.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Angela Hedrick, LPC

KVC Kansas Vice President of Operations