Testimony on HB 2329 – Juvenile Offender Placement Options
House Corrections and Juvenile Justice Committee
February 13, 2025

Chair Lewis, Vice Chair Resman, Ranking Member Schlingensiepen, and members of the committee. My name is Matt Stephens, and I serve as the Vice President of Advocacy for Saint Francis Ministries (SFM). Saint Francis Ministries is an independent, not-for-profit organization committed to serving Kansas children and families since 1945. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of HB 2329.

HB 2329 addresses a critical gap in Kansas' juvenile justice and child welfare systems by expanding placement options for high-needs youth who cannot safely remain in traditional foster care settings. As the system currently stands, placement shortages have resulted in children—many with histories of violent, assaultive, or sexualized behaviors—having no alternative but to sleep in child welfare offices due to a lack of available placements.

As you know, historically, the Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC) maintained a continuum of placement services, including foster homes, residential programs, and detention facilities. This approach allowed children to be served in the least restrictive placement possible while still ensuring community safety and providing necessary rehabilitative services under the guidance of trained staff.

Additionally, KDOC placements were separate from traditional foster care, reducing the risk of additional trauma. Today, that distinction no longer exists, and it is not uncommon for children in foster care to be assaulted by their peers who have significant behavioral challenges. This lack of differentiation puts all youth at risk, both those with high needs and those who do not require the same level of intervention.

In FY24, more than 78 youth spent a combined 143 nights sleeping in child welfare offices most due to placements unwilling to accept youth due to violent or sexualized behaviors. This situation is unacceptable. These youth require structured, therapeutic environments, not emergency office stays that only exacerbate their trauma and instability.

Additionally, the strain on family foster homes has been immense. Many foster families have stopped fostering due to their homes being vandalized, their cars being stolen, or even experiencing assaults. Without the proper accountability measures and structured interventions, these behaviors not only jeopardize the safety of caregivers but also discourage potential foster families from stepping forward—further exacerbating the placement crisis in Kansas.

HB 2329 expands non-foster home bed capacity in youth residential facilities to ensure high-needs youth receive appropriate care while maintaining community safety. It also directs the Secretary of Corrections to allocate necessary funding for these placements, helping to restore the distinction between youth with significant criminogenic behaviors and traditional foster care, ultimately reducing peer-to-peer assaults and ensuring all children receive the appropriate level of

care and supervision. By passing this bill, we can decrease the need for children to sleep in offices and provide them with the services and stability they desperately need.

HB 2329 represents a necessary step in ensuring that Kansas youth receive the care, supervision, and rehabilitative support they need. I respectfully urge the committee to support this bill and help create safer, more stable placement options for our most vulnerable youth.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Matt Stephens
Vice President of Advocacy
Saint Francis Ministries