SEDGWICK COUNTY, KANSAS

SHERIFF'S OFFICE
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Testimony to Committee on Corrections and Juvenile Justice
Supporting Testimony on HB 2329

Chairman Bob Lewis and Committee Members,

To be clear I am testifying in support of this bill on behalf of the citizens of Sedgwick County. I am not testifying as the Kansas Sheriff's Association Legislative Chair.

On page 8, starting on line 36, proposed new language states: ((1) If the court orders a short-term alternative placement of a juvenile pursuant to subsection (k), the secretary shall be responsible for the costs associated with all aspects of such placement. The secretary shall contract with emergency shelters and therapeutic foster homes to facilitate the placement of juvenile offenders pursuant to subsection (k).)

On page 16, starting on line 23, proposed new language states: ((4) determine regional allocation of non-foster home beds based on the needs of the region utilizing available data on juvenile case filings.)

On page 17, starting on line 23, proposed new language states: ((4) Subject to provisions of appropriation acts, the secretary of corrections shall make expenditures from the evidence-based programs account of the state general fund moneys, in an amount not to exceed $10,000,000 in any fiscal year, to contract for non-foster home beds in your residential facilities for placement of juvenile offenders as required in K.S.A. 38-2399, and amendments thereto.)

Several years ago, the legislature passed the 367 bill to revamp juvenile justice, the intent was not to place as many juveniles into custody. I testified on that bill that there is a certain percentage of juveniles that were going to slip through the cracks because of their constant poor or criminal behavior. This has happened and now is overloading the foster-home system and group home alternatives. I believe the bill assisted most juveniles from becoming part of the system. However, around 10% are continually involved in the criminal justice system and victimizing more people.

In the Wichita/Sedgwick County area, these kids are placed into foster-care and group homes. Law enforcement from the Wichita Police Department and Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office are consistently responding to calls from foster parents who want us to pick the juvenile because they are out of control or have run away again. The same goes for juveniles that are placed in group homes.

Some statistics from the Wichita Police Department. As of May of 2024, there were 39 residential facilities in Sedgwick County that serve as group homes for youth in foster care. Of those, 31 are in Wichita, the others reside in Sedgwick County. Across the state, there are not enough foster care facilities to support the foster care system, and the situation is even more dire for those youth that are deemed to have behavioral issues or are otherwise difficult to place.

One example of this is a string of cases the Wichita Police Department worked in 2024 involving three kids from Wyandotte County and Chanute, Kansas. They were responsible for at least 34 cases being generated. Those cases involved 5 runaway cases, 8 burglary cases, 5 destruction of property cases, 7 thefts from vehicle cases, 2 hit and run cases, 6 stolen auto cases and 1 juvenile in possession of a firearm case. In all these cases the juveniles involved were supposed to be in group home but were not and reports of them being a runaway during these times was not reported by the entity running the group home.

Wichita and Sedgwick County, due to placement centers in the area, are also being used to place juveniles from other counties here. A total of 444 juveniles in 2024 were placed in foster care or group home settings from other counties. This contributes to our high juvenile crime rate.

Sedgwick County has two large group homes that the sheriff's office responds to on a regular basis. We do not see the number of runaway cases as the WPD responds to, due to these homes being in a very rural area. However, we respond to assaults on staff, assaults on other juveniles, sexual assault reports and almost on a daily or nightly basis, juveniles refusing to go to school, refusing to go to bed and refusing to relinquish their phones during class settings and bedtime.

Bottom line, law enforcement resources are being highly utilized by foster parents and group homes on a regular basis. This was not the case prior to the implementation of the 367 laws.

I am asking for your support on HB 2329 to assist in placement of these juveniles and creating more space in other parts of Kansas to reduce the number of juveniles being placed in the Wichita area.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sheriff Jeff Easter
Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office

Sincerely,

Jeffrey T. Easter
Sedgwick County Sheriff