



Kansas Statewide Homeless Coalition

Chairman Awerkamp and Members of this Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today. My name is Molly Mendenhall, Director of Destination Home at Kansas Statewide Homeless Coalition. We are a not-for-profit organization that collaborates with local, state, and national partners to coordinate with communities throughout the state to provide advocacy, education, and collaboration to end homelessness in Kansas. We are also the Collaborative Applicant for the Kansas Balance of State Continuum of Care (COC), which covers 101 of Kansas Counties. We oppose HB 2430 because it will cause greater harm to and further marginalize individuals experiencing homelessness.

People experiencing homelessness are already disproportionately criminalized for trying to exist and meet their needs, and HB 2430 will only further disenfranchise them. Criminal charges for trying to meet basic needs such as accessing food, shelter, or using the restroom will negatively impact their ability to access safe and stable housing. The best, and most effective, way to end homelessness is through the creation of safe, accessible, affordable housing. Until there is enough housing and resources for those who are homeless, there will be people sleeping outside, in cars, etc. HB 2430 not only promotes the criminalization of homelessness, it will also disproportionately effect people of color, including Black, Native American, and Latino Kansans. According to the US Census, 7.6% of Kansans are Black or African American, while 19% of households entered into our Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) identify as Black or African American. By these numbers alone, this bill would perpetuate and continue the criminalize of Black people in the United States.

This law would also disproportionately affect those in rural and frontier areas of the state, as well. Due to the resource deserts in these areas, people are often forced to sleep in unsavory conditions in order to stay connected to their support systems. There are often no shelters, transitional living programs, or other short term options for people in rural and frontier areas. This means that their only option is to camp, or to leave everything they know, their families, friends, jobs, caseworkers, etc., to find shelter, which makes accessing housing and regaining stability more difficult.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has set guidelines about best practices and procedures for reducing and ending homelessness. One of these processes is the utilization of a Coordinated Entry System (CES). Coordinated Entry Systems are a standardized way to connect individuals to housing programs and resources in a way that prioritizes them based on how vulnerable they are. Across the nation, including the Kansas Balance of State CoC, Coordinated Entry is working. Between October 2021 and September 2022, 63% of individuals who were connected to Coordinated Entry exited to permanent housing situations, while only 4% returned to homelessness. The ultimate goal of this system is to achieve what is known as “functional zero.” Functional zero means that as soon

as an individual or family experiencing homelessness is located, assessed, and added to coordinated entry, that there is a suitable housing program with an opening that the individual can be referred to with minimal wait times. The Kansas Balance of State CoC covers 101 of the 105 counties in Kansas, which are divided into 9 regions. Currently 3 of our regions have achieved and maintain a status of functional zero.

Another tenant that HUD has set as a guideline, and that National Homeless Strategy has set as a federal policy strategy to reduce homelessness, is Housing First. Housing First is a strategy founded by Sam Tsemberis that allows homeless individuals and families to access housing with minimal requirements, such as sobriety, mental health treatment, etc., and that surrounds them with supportive services at the same time to help them achieve success. Kansas has adopted this strategy in how we, as a state, approach homelessness. A vital part of Housing First is robust and varied funding streams to be able to tailor the housing to the household's needs. Since HB 2430 seeks to prevent access to state funds if municipalities do not criminalize their homeless, housing success rates will plummet, and more households will end up without housing or homeless for longer periods of time. HB 2430 seeks to remove homeless individuals from the street, however, once released from jail, these households will still not have housing and will end up back on the streets, creating a vicious cycle of criminalization. We have found that the most effective way to end homelessness is to provide housing and support services.

Thank you so much to Chair Averkamp and the members of this committee for allowing time to provide this testimony.