

HB 2430 - Opponent Testimony
Philomena Sulzen
In-person and Written
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Chairman Averkamp, Vice-Chair Howell, Ranking Member Meyer, and Members of the House Committee on Welfare Reform:

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony in opposition to HB 2430. As you consider my testimony, I ask that you take it from my background. I am a US Marine Corps Veteran, former Miss Kansas 2019 American Woman of Service, Catholic, and Kansan.

Today, I submit testimony against passage of HB 2430. This legislation does nothing to help homeless people in Kansas. Invest the money you want to direct to law enforcement to automatically prosecute the people experiencing homelessness into building better shelters or places in the community where the homeless can get their basic needs met. Please stop the automatic judgment. They are good people. Every Kansan is worthy of love, respect, dignity, and a place to live, and ensuring these basic needs are met, allows us as a community to provide other needs and people to flourish, even those experiencing financial and social challenges.

HB 2430 is problematic in multiple ways. It stigmatizes homelessness, without addressing the root causes of homelessness. The legislation ties funding for addressing the unhoused Kansas population to the prosecution of these Kansans. Further, it inhibits local solutions in addressing the unhoused population of Kansas. Given the depths of this problem, I believe it should be an all-hands on deck approach with various approaches to determine what works and what does not. Instead of requiring criminal prosecution and the associated costs, we should develop more creative approaches to address the needs and circumstances of the unhoused population of Kansas.

This bill does little positive to address the causes of homelessness, and instead makes criminals of people already experiencing hardship. It criminalizes an issue without seeking to understand it. It stigmatizes those already down and out and in hard times. It reduces individuals to what people think they are instead of seeking to understand them as people in need of treatment and care. It makes people dealing with mental health care issues, health issues, drug issues, whatever the issue may be harder for them to seek help because they do not have a stable place to seek that help from. Additionally, they are already judged by others as criminal, and as such, they are less likely to ask for the actual help they need that also would help maintain stable housing.

Included in my testimony is a personal narrative of my work to help single Kansas family experiencing homelessness. I urge all committee members to review this, as I may become too emotional. Please consider my thoughts and experiences before voting to pass HB 2430.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my thoughts. I urge you to oppose HB 2430.

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In 2018, in my work as Miss Kansas 2019 American Woman of Service (I started my service in Fall 2018), I had the opportunity to do community service work in Topeka at a soup kitchen and I met Amy and David Monroe. Amy and David had come to Kansas from out of state and were looking to make Kansas a home to raise their family and their expectant baby. Amy was pregnant at the time, and they had their car, but it had broken down and circumstance left them stranded and reliant on the good will of strangers. Especially at a time such as Christmas, I could not in good faith leave Amy and her partner and their soon to be baby alone under a bridge in the frigid cold Kansas weather. The homeless shelters in Topeka were full up and the women's crisis shelters while able to take Amy, wouldn't necessarily take her partner and father of her unborn child. In other words, there really was no room in the inn.

I had been taught to be generous to strangers and I also had an apartment in Manhattan I was not fully using at the time as I had the support of my family, so I thought I could offer it up to them for shelter for a few days while we worked with existing organizations in Manhattan to get them the support, they needed to be self-sufficient. I wish I could end this story with a bow of Christmas and Kansas Hospitality and how Amy and David and their baby were able to move on and up and get the care they needed and stable housing for them and their family.

That's not the case. While I was willing to help them, I could only do so much and I myself faced stigma and judgment for choosing to help.

While my dad who lives in St Marys was ok with opening his house to them to shower, my mom was worried the whole time they would "rob her" and "were they on drugs".

To me all I saw were two people down on their luck at Christmas who needed housing, care, and Kansas did not have that access. I saw first-hand how Kansans themselves were struggling with homelessness; Amy and David weren't the only ones under that bridge, and I witnessed first had the stigma these people endure to get care and to keep their families together.

Not only that, but as I helped them, I was told and treated like I was doing something incredibly naive and risky.

However, I have been taught that helping the stranger and giving food and shelter to the hungry and thirsty and homeless is how I will be judge in the end and I need to act accordingly. Not only that, but I have been given so much, and I am pro-life, it is my duty to approach life with love and return the generosity I have been granted.

When I opened my heart and my home to Amy and David, I expected nothing in return. I was judged by a community that professes to be Catholic. This saddened me as I did not understand what I was doing wrong.

Kansas does not have programs in place to help them, and neither do these communities that profess to help homelessness. Or the housing situation that we have is few and far between and not adequate to support all types of peoples or family situations like Amy and David.

It shouldn't be left up to a single mother who is struggling with mental health issues herself to sort out these issues, but as stated before, if I see an issue, I am going to try to do something about it. I hope this story can be a testimony to how we can treat all Kansans as individuals worthy of our time and worthy or adequate shelter.

Thank you for your time.