

HB2723 Testimony  
House Committee of Welfare Reform  
March 5, 2024  
By Randy Callstrom

Chair Awerkamp and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony here today. My name is Randy Callstrom, and I am the President and CEO of Wyandot Behavioral Health Network. We are a Community Mental Health Center (CMHC) and a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC) serving Wyandotte County. We also have a housing division called Kim Wilson Housing. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of HB 2723.

Homelessness in Wyandotte County continues to be a growing problem. This winter 148 individuals sought help in the extreme weather shelter in KCK when the temperature dropped below 25 degrees. Two of our clients lost their lives to the cold. We continue to have clients who have no housing options, who had been court ordered for involuntary treatment, discharged from Osawatomie State Hospital to the City Union Mission shelter in Kansas City Missouri. And of an average of 175 people who receive services at our crisis stabilization center, RSI, each month, approximately 50% identify as being homeless.

Kim Wilson Housing is focused on helping people who are homeless and living with mental illness or substance use disorders acquire and maintain housing. Highlights of our work include:

- Weekly outreach to homeless camps with community partners.
- A drop-in center providing showers, laundry services, and a mailing address.
- Working closely with the KC metro Continuum of Care.
- Housing location services and landlord mediation.
- Supported housing services.
- Added a new 4 bed transitional housing program for individuals exiting the State Hospital.
- Manage five (5) HUD grants.
- Through the HUD grants, KWH added more than 40 added new housing units in Wyandotte County and helped place 108 individuals in affordable housing.

While Kim Wilson Housing does a lot to help those who are houseless, there is much more work that needs to be done. The demand for housing and supported housing services is simply greater than the supply.

Wyandotte County does not have a permanent shelter and there is not a site that has been identified for an extreme weather shelter next year. A permanent, low-barrier shelter is needed to help individuals move into permanent housing and to keep people safe from the elements.

We actively work to move people from long term care at the State Hospital and the Nursing Facility for Mental Health (NFMH) back to their community, but many lack the skills or capacity to live independently. Funding for transitional housing programs to help prepare people to be successful living independently is needed. This includes funding for facilities and operational expenses such as food and utilities.

Funding for Permanent Supported Housing Services is needed to help those living independently maintain their housing. Housing can be lost due to anxiety, paranoia, or behaviors that are disruptive to neighbors and can lead to eviction. On-site services, in some cases 24/7, are needed to help intervene and support individuals in real time.

For a few, an alternative to the State Hospital or NFMH that offers long-term, 24/7 community-based support is needed.

Additional housing subsidies or vouchers are needed. A 61-year-old client, who has severe mental illness and physical disabilities, recently became homeless after years of stable housing. He receives \$914 a month from SSI and his rent has ballooned from \$650 to \$907 a month. This caused him to fall short of paying his rent and eventually led to his eviction. Because he has had housing, he does not qualify for a HUD program, and the waiting list for Section 8 housing in Wyandotte County is closed. He can't even get on the list. We estimate between 150 and 200 of our clients need subsidies to obtain and maintain housing.

Finally, funding is needed for homeless outreach, housing location services, and landlord mediation.

While this would require a serious investment in housing, studies have shown that the savings in emergency room visits, jail bookings, acute and state hospital admissions are greater than the cost.

Thank you. And I will stand for questions at the appropriate time.