



**Unified Government of
Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas**

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IN -PERSON TESTIMONY

House Bill 2723

On behalf of the Unified Government of Wyandotte County/Kansas City, Kansas

House Welfare Reform Committee

March 5, 2024

Good Afternoon Chairman Awerkamp and Members of the Committee:

My name is Alan Howze and I am the Assistant County Administrator for the Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas. I am presenting this testimony in support of House Bill 2723, which establishes a \$40 million grant fund at the Department of Aging and Disability Services for municipalities to improve and develop infrastructure for homeless shelters.

Like many urban areas, Wyandotte County has a significant homeless population. The Wyandotte Point-In-Time count in 2019 identified 81 unsheltered persons. In 2023 the number had climbed over 50% to 125 people. The rapid increase in unhoused persons has compounded the struggle to find housing solutions and wraparound services for these individuals. This issue has been exacerbated by the ban on sleeping on public lands that was enacted by the State of Missouri. Since we are just across the state line we have seen an influx of Missourians that are homeless. The reasons that people fall into homelessness are varied and complex, but the rapid rise in homelessness has caused a serious strain on the resources that we have been devoting to those Wyandotte County residents that are without housing.

This year, for the first time, the Unified Government Commission included a request for state funding to help address homelessness as part of the Commission's State Legislative Agenda. This is a recognition that homelessness isn't just a local issue, and that

state support to address the complex issues of homelessness is imperative. The Unified Government appreciates the Legislature considering additional investment in infrastructure and wraparound services.

The Unified Government works with numerous non-profit entities and Wyandotte County Behavioral Health to identify and address the needs of homeless individuals in our community. Our community is also part of a bi-state Continuum of Care and we are engaging with the Mid-America Regional Council to identify regional opportunities for collaboration in addressing homelessness.

Wyandotte County does not have a permanent homeless shelter. For the past several years, the UG has contracted with a local non-profit to operate a warming shelter that is open during severe cold weather. This shelter has undoubtedly saved lives such as during the bitter cold we experienced in January. But it only operates during the winter and does not meet the needs for unhoused individuals during the rest of the year. We are working to identify a suitable location for a year-round shelter that could also provide wraparound services from community providers. In addition, we are looking at how to address the needs of specific vulnerable sub-populations such as youth that are aging out of foster care. But being able to do any of these strategies successfully requires more resources than we currently have. This is why we welcome House Bill 2723.

The Kansas Statewide Homeless Coalition and United Community Services of Johnson County have offered substantive feedback, which we agree with, on ways that the legislation could be tweaked to increase the impact of the funds, assemble better data and provide research and evaluation upon which to base future actions.

If this bill is enacted into law, the Unified Government would look to apply for a grant that allows us to provide more shelter services, ideally through the creation of a year-round shelter, along with the critical wraparound services that these individuals need. We do not want to warehouse homeless individuals. We want to identify their challenges and connect them with the services that will allow them to find permanent housing, address mental health and substance abuse needs if they exist, find gainful employment, and live productive, happy lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the UG's perspective on this important issue and on behalf of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas, I urge you to act favorably on House Bill 2723.