

## TESTIMONY OF CRYSTAL KAUR

### Opponent – Senate Bill 256

Senate Government Efficiency Committee

March 6, 2025

**Chairperson Erickson, Members of the Committee,**

My name is Crystal Kaur, and I have lived in **Hoxie, Kansas, for most of my life**. I am here today to testify **in opposition to Senate Bill 256, the so-called "Back to Work Act."** I am speaking as a **current employee of the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF), a social work student, and someone who has both provided and received services that will be directly harmed by this bill.**

I have worked for **DCF since March 2024** in multiple roles: as an **Operations Human Services Assistant**, as a **Child Protective Investigator**, and now as a **Protection Specialist for the Kansas Protection Reporting Center**. Before that, I worked in the private sector at a **locally owned gas station in Hoxie** while receiving **food assistance** from the same programs DCF helps administer. This experience has given me a **firsthand understanding of both the challenges that DCF employees face and the needs of the Kansans we serve**—particularly in rural communities.

### **SB 256 Will Worsen Kansas' DCF Workforce Crisis**

This bill **eliminates hybrid and remote work for full-time state employees** under the assumption that physical office presence equals productivity. That is simply **not true**—and DCF is proof of that.

Right now, **DCF uses remote work as a critical recruiting tool** to attract employees, particularly for **Eligibility Specialists**, whose starting pay is **only \$18–\$19 per hour**. This is already a difficult position to fill, and without hybrid flexibility, recruitment and retention will **plummet**—leading to **longer wait times for clients in need of food assistance, childcare assistance, and TANF benefits**.

The statewide **call center** that conducts eligibility interviews is **full before 8:30 AM daily**, meaning clients often **have no choice but to visit local DCF offices**. To handle this demand, **Northwest Kansas has implemented a "virtual lobby,"** allowing clients to walk into an office and receive an interview over the phone with a remote worker rather than waiting for an in-person interview. This system **increases efficiency, reduces wait times, and improves client access to critical benefits**—and it is only possible because of hybrid work.

Additionally, **SB 256 will drive experienced DCF employees out of the workforce**. The Low-Income Energy Assistance Program (LIEAP) in my region has **five veteran employees who could retire today—but they choose to stay because they are able to work remotely**. If this bill passes, **DCF will lose them and others like them**, making an already struggling system worse.

### **The Impact on Rural Child Protection Services**

In child welfare, this bill is **especially dangerous**. Right now, APS and CPS investigators in rural Kansas **cover massive geographic areas**—one office alone is responsible for **eight counties**. A five-day in-office mandate will **force these workers to waste additional hours commuting to an**

**office and back home** instead of responding to **reports of child abuse, neglect, and exploitation**.

This will **put children and vulnerable adults at greater risk**. The reality is that **CPS and APS workers already face high burnout** due to the **emotional toll and overwhelming caseloads**. On the few days when these employees do not have home visits scheduled, **forcing them into an office just to sit at a desk and complete paperwork** only adds to that stress—when they could do the same work more efficiently from home.

NASW—the **largest professional organization representing social workers**—has **explicitly supported policies that reduce stress, prevent burnout, and improve worker retention**. This bill does the opposite.

### **This Bill Wastes Time, Resources, and Ignores Rural Needs**

SB 256 forces workers back into state offices **without solving a single efficiency issue**. It disregards the **unique needs of rural workers**—many of whom **already commute long distances to get to their assigned offices**.

For example, **state cars cannot be parked at residences overnight**, meaning an investigator would have to **return a state car to the office at the end of the day, then drive their personal car home—adding unnecessary commute time** that could be spent conducting investigations or processing casework.

**Senator Rick Billinger, who represents rural Northwest Kansas, should know better**. He was born in **Quinter** and now resides in **Goodland**, two communities that will **suffer directly** from this policy. **Goodland’s DCF office is only open three days per week**—how does requiring employees to be in a closed office serve the people of his district? **How does forcing rural employees into unnecessary commutes help rural Kansas? How will this increase efficiency when high Kansas winds make travel across the plains of rural Kansas dangerous?**

This bill **does not improve efficiency, does not help Kansans, and does not solve any actual problem**. It is a **solution in search of a problem**, and the people who will suffer most are **DCF clients, rural Kansans, and the state workers who serve them**.

### **ADA Accommodations and the Flawed Exception Process**

SB 256 does not account for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) **protections that require reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities**. The bill claims that agency heads “may grant exceptions” for some employees, but in reality, the process of granting accommodations is often slow, inconsistent, and unpredictable—leaving disabled workers in uncertain, vulnerable positions.

Under **current federal law, remote work is considered a reasonable accommodation when it does not create undue hardship for the employer**—and **DCF has already demonstrated that hybrid work does not negatively impact productivity**. In fact, employees working remotely are

subject to **strict performance monitoring through Amazon Connect and Business Process Management** oversight—ensuring that job responsibilities are met whether in-office or at home.

However, SB 256 forces employees into a position where they must repeatedly justify their need for accommodations, going through an **inefficient** bureaucratic process that is not guaranteed to approve every legitimate request. Workers with **disabilities, chronic illnesses, or caregiving responsibilities** should not have to fight for the right to keep their jobs simply because the state prefers to see them sitting at a desk.

By removing the option of hybrid work as a default policy and instead making accommodations subject to an inefficient approval process, SB 256 sets up **unnecessary barriers for employees with disabilities** and may lead to the **state violating federal workplace protections under the ADA**.

While the bill claims that agency heads can grant exceptions to the in-office requirement, this does not mean exceptions will be granted fairly or efficiently.

There is no guarantee that all factors will be considered when deciding whether to grant an exception. Employees **with long commutes, rural home locations, caregiving responsibilities, or disabilities may not be given equal weight in the decision-making process**. The bill provides **no clear criteria for how exceptions will be approved or denied**, creating an environment where agency heads could apply the rule inconsistently or **deny exceptions altogether** to avoid extra paperwork.

Additionally, the state **does not have an efficient process for handling large numbers of exception requests**. If hundreds of employees request hybrid work exceptions, how long will it take for approvals to be processed? In the meantime, workers will be forced to comply with in-office mandates, potentially pushing them to quit before their cases are even reviewed.

**Instead of forcing** state agencies into an **unnecessary, inefficient approval process**, the **default policy** should be one that **recognizes remote/hybrid work as a proven and effective model**.

### **This Bill Will Force Me—and Others Like Me—Out of Public Service**

If SB 256 is passed, **I will be forced to resign from my position at the Kansas Protection Reporting Center**, where I **answer calls reporting allegations of child and elder abuse and neglect**. Instead of doing critical work that keeps vulnerable children and adults safe, **I would have no choice but to return to my previous job at a local family-owned gas station in Hoxie with low wages**—one of the few options available in my small community.

This is not just about me. **Many DCF workers, especially in rural areas, will face the same decision**. With wages that **do not compete with high paying private-sector jobs that allow remote work** and the **removal of remote/hybrid work flexibility**, the state will continue to **lose experienced workers to jobs outside of public service**.

And just like that, I would go from being **the person answering calls from Kansans in crisis to being a Kansan in crisis myself**—once again needing food assistance and other benefits from the very agency I once worked for.

**Although I cannot speak about the consequences this bill will have on DCF workers and clients in big cities, if the goal of this bill is to fill government office spaces regardless of the consequences, then it might succeed at that. If the goal of this bill is to drive up the Kansas unemployment rate and increase the amount of rural Kansans that qualify for public assistance, thus negatively impacting the economy, it will succeed at that.**

**But if the goal is to help Kansans and ensure DCF has the staff it needs to efficiently serve the public, then this bill is a complete failure.**

#### **Final Message to the Committee**

Chairperson Erickson, members of the committee, this bill is **not about efficiency**—it is about **forcing workers back into offices for the sake of appearances**, no matter the consequences. Any elected official who claims to **represent Kansans** should **oppose SB 256** because **it actively harms rural workers and clients**.

I urge this committee to **reject SB 256** and instead focus on **real solutions** that will help recruit and retain state workers, **not push them out in an ineffective attempt to “save money.”**

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions.