



**Proponent Testimony – HB 2329  
Senate Judiciary Committee  
January 22, 2026**

Chair Warren, Vice Chair Titus, Ranking Member Corson, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony today regarding HB 2329.

I am Gina Meier-Hummel. I am in my 33rd year of serving at-risk Kansas families. I have spent my career working both in public child welfare and in nonprofit management. I am the former Secretary for DCF, a former Commissioner for KDADS, a former Deputy Director for Victim Services for the AG's office, and now I am in my seventh year of serving O'Connell Children's Shelter as its Executive Director. I am also an Adjunct Professor of Social Work at Washburn University.

In 2016, when Kansas enacted SB 367 to reduce juvenile detention and emphasize community-based responses, these efforts were well-intentioned and in keeping with national best practices. However, restricting detention options without a corresponding widespread and community-based investment in early intervention practices to address concerning behaviors has resulted in youth being placed in the child welfare system by default as parents and courts struggle with how to address problematic child behaviors.

O'Connell is uniquely positioned to provide insight on the benefits of HB 2329 as at various points our agency has served youth in both the juvenile offender (JO) and Child in Need of Care (CINC) streams of placement, and we currently regularly serve youth who have been placed in our residential facilities who have higher acuity needs than a typical foster family can support, often times because of their juvenile delinquent behavior. We recognize the child welfare system has always served children, youth, and families who have been or are currently involved with the juvenile justice system. The reality is that juvenile justice reform moved youth whose behaviors are not severe enough to warrant detention, but who are not safe to remain at home, into the foster care system. Into a system not designed to meet these unique needs.

Now youth are consistently placed in the foster care system, not for neglect or abuse reasons, but rather for behaviors that place that child and others at risk—e.g.,

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substance use disorders, sexual behavior problems, physical aggression, running away, or gang involvement. Placement in the foster care system does not magically halt a youth's juvenile offender behaviors without appropriate interventions and support. Youth who are engaging in high-risk behaviors, placing themselves and others at risk, as well as their families, deserve to receive interventions designed to reduce these behaviors. Youth with such behaviors are much more likely to experience failure or placement disruption and to require higher levels of care. HB 2329 recognizes this fact and offers a refined juvenile justice approach, which allows the courts to address each youth's juvenile offender rehabilitation needs more appropriately.

Just this past weekend in Lawrence, we witnessed what escalating juvenile delinquent behavior looks like and the deadly consequences when the system fails to do what it was intended to do to reform young offenders by holding them accountable for their illegal actions.

When adequately funded, O'Connell stands ready to continue to aid a population that we have served on and off for years. As a residential facility, we provide all the critical components to address the needs of this population including clinical assessments, education continuity, family engagement dosage, and step-down planning. We have done this work before, and we are prepared to do it again. Assuming our JCIC beds are adequately funded we are prepared to open them this summer.

O'Connell is unique in our ability to provide both sides of support for youth. As part of our prevention continuum, O'Connell Children's Shelter provides early-intervention services. These services focus on stabilizing school engagement and family functioning before concerns escalate into formal court involvement, detention, or residential placement. Across our prevention and early-intervention programming in 2024, O'Connell served 378 youth, including both adolescents and younger children. In this work, 66 percent of participating youth successfully completed programming, and 83 percent had no new court filing. These are not low-risk cases. These are youth experiencing behavioral concerns, school disengagement, family instability, and unmet mental health or substance use needs — the same factors that later appear in detention and residential placement settings. We know the difference community-based prevention efforts make when adequately funded and built to address families' needs.

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Finally, this bill promotes timely and meaningful consequences for youth who commit violent offenses, while still allowing for rehabilitation. Communities deserve safety, and young people need clear, immediate responses when serious harm occurs. HB 2329 supports accountability that is developmentally appropriate and paired with services that reduce the likelihood of re-offense. This balanced approach acknowledges public safety concerns without defaulting responses that can increase long-term system involvement or worsen outcomes. O'Connell is prepared to provide both ends of these services. We have programs in place to intervene with youth early and if those efforts fail, we are ready to provide more restrictive placements and high-intensity services to meet the needs of offending youth.

O'Connell Children's Shelter stands ready to be a partner in this work. We bring a 50 year service history, data from prevention, early intervention, and residential programming, and we see firsthand what happens when systems invest early — and when they don't.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to the safety and future of Kansas youth. I am happy to answer any questions.

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