

Testimony on HB 2329
Senate Committee on Judiciary
January 22, 2026

Chair Warren, Vice Chair Titus, Ranking Member Corson, and members of the committee.

My name is Matt Stephens, and I serve as Vice President of Advocacy for Saint Francis Ministries. Saint Francis Ministries is an independent, not-for-profit organization that has served Kansas children and families since 1945. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 2329.

Saint Francis Ministries, along with other child welfare providers, supports legislation that strengthens the Kansas Department of Corrections' ability to offer a broader, more effective continuum of care for youth who commit juvenile offenses. Our concerns are how gaps in the current system are playing out in practice.

Nearly a decade into juvenile justice reform, Kansas is now confronting the downstream effects of a system that narrowed detention without sufficiently expanding services for youth with higher needs. For a small but significant subset of youth, particularly repeat offenders or those involved in serious offenses, the absence of appropriate juvenile justice options has resulted in their placement in the child welfare system. Child welfare has increasingly become the default, not because it is the right system, but because it is the only system available.

As one national analysis states, "When other public systems lack the capacity to respond to family needs—including mental health, substance abuse treatment, juvenile justice, and services funded through Medicaid—child welfare systems often become the default safety net." That statement accurately reflects what we are seeing in Kansas today. I have listed several examples below:

December 2025: Saint Francis Ministries received a referral for a 16-year-old female with an active juvenile case. The referral cited ongoing physical and verbal aggression toward individuals in the home, creating safety concerns for caregivers. The primary driver was escalating delinquent behavior rather than substantiated abuse or neglect.

November 2025: Saint Francis Ministries received a referral for a 16-year-old male with a significant juvenile offender history including theft, fighting at school, threats toward others, and physical assaults on peers and a caregiver. His juvenile history included multiple counts of battery, criminal damage to property, and disorderly conduct. At the time of referral, the youth was residing in a juvenile detention center, yet child welfare placement was pursued presumably due to the absence of an appropriate long-term juvenile justice option.

October 2025: Saint Francis Ministries received a referral for a male youth nearing his 18th birthday who had been charged and convicted as an adult for battery against a family member and was subject to a no-contact order. The youth had a long history of serious juvenile justice involvement. At the time of referral, the youth was being held in county jail on adult charges, yet child welfare placement is being utilized until the youth's 18th birthday.

These examples represent a limited but concerning population of youth whose primary needs stem from juvenile justice involvement rather than abuse or neglect. We are not talking about a large number of children. The number of youth who could benefit from the options contemplated in HB 2329 aligns with the bill's narrow scope.

Another important component of HB 2329 is the use of a mandatory detention override for youth who possess firearms while allegedly committing an offense, as well as potential expansion to other serious behaviors. Saint Francis Ministries supports this provision as recognition that certain conduct warrants a clear, immediate, and predictable response.

For a narrow subset of cases, a short period of detention can serve an important stabilizing function. It provides swift and known consequences for dangerous behavior, protects public safety, and creates critical time for courts, juvenile justice officials, and providers to assess risk and identify appropriate next steps. In cases where youth are already involved with the child welfare system, this limited use of detention can also give providers the time necessary to locate safer, more appropriate placements rather than making rushed decisions that may place other children or caregivers at risk. This approach preserves the intent of juvenile justice reform by limiting detention to serious circumstances, while ensuring that accountability and safety are not lost in the process.

Placing justice-involved youth into foster care creates challenges for everyone involved. Foster homes and congregate care providers are designed to address safety, permanency, and well-being, not to serve as substitutes for probation supervision or correctional programming. For youth with significant behavioral needs, the absence of consistent structure and accountability can worsen outcomes rather than improve them.

HB 2329 should be viewed as an important first step, not a final answer. It represents a necessary course correction in a system that has allowed child welfare to absorb responsibilities that properly belong within juvenile justice.

As a child welfare professional, I am not best positioned to prescribe the full design of KDOC's juvenile justice continuum. That work should be informed by juvenile justice practitioners, clinicians, and system experts. However, the need for continued discussion should not delay action. Kansas should move forward with HB 2329 now while continuing broader conversations about long-term system design. Allowing the status quo to persist only prolongs outcomes that are not working for youth, families, providers, or public safety.

For these reasons, Saint Francis Ministries supports HB 2329 and respectfully urges the committee to support the bill. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully submitted,

Matt Stephens
Vice President of Advocacy
Saint Francis Ministries