

Written Proponent Testimony on HB2329

To: Kansas Senate Judiciary Committee

Chair: Senator Kellie Warren

Hearing Date: January 22, 2026

Submitted by: Rachel Mestad, Director of Field Services, Johnson County Department of Corrections

Chairperson Warren and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written proponent testimony on House Bill 2329 on behalf of Johnson County, Kansas, consistent with the County's adopted legislative platform.

We support meaningful reform of the juvenile justice system and share the Legislature's goal of improving outcomes for youth, particularly those at highest risk of reoffending or causing harm. We recognize that some high-risk youth require a level of structure, treatment, and supervision that cannot always be provided in their home environment. When clearly defined and appropriately implemented, out-of-home placements can play a role within a comprehensive juvenile justice continuum.

HB 2329 includes several provisions that move the system forward. However, we want more collaborative conversation about certain elements of the bill and how they may be implemented. Our comments focus on preserving local discretion, supporting evidence-based practice, protecting community-based services, and ensuring accountability and transparency.

1. Clarity on the Out-of-Home Placement Model

HB 2329 authorizes expanded use of "non-foster home beds in youth residential facilities." We request greater clarity regarding this model.

Any expansion of residential placements should be accompanied by a clear, detailed plan from the Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC) that outlines the model, standards, provider oversight, accountability, quality measures, and how these placements differ from the pre-SB367 models.

We do not support a return to pre-SB367 models characterized by large congregate settings, limited oversight, inconsistent outcomes, or weak integration with community-based supervision.

2. Phased Implementation and Oversight

We recommend a phased approach to any expansion of out-of-home placements, beginning with the establishment of clear provider standards, including staffing requirements, treatment philosophy, and measurable outcomes.

Implementation should then proceed through a limited or pilot rollout to assess fidelity and early results. Statewide expansion should occur only after data demonstrate improved safety, reduced recidivism, positive youth outcomes, and cost-effectiveness. This phased approach promotes accountability and reduces implementation risk.

3. Community-Based Supervision Must Remain Central

Community-based supervision and services must remain the foundation of Kansas's juvenile justice system. Out-of-home placement should remain the exception.

Following SB 367, resources redirected from residential facilities were intentionally reinvested in community-based services. These services are now established and effective. We are concerned that expanding the use of out-of-home residential placements could divert funding away from established community-based alternatives.

Protecting community-based services is essential to maintaining an effective continuum of care and ensuring the least restrictive intervention necessary for public safety and behavior change.

4. Data, Transparency, and Reporting

Out-of-home placements must include strong data collection and transparency requirements. KDOC should be required to produce regular public reports detailing placement utilization and demographics; youth outcomes, including recidivism and successful transitions back to the community; costs and comparisons to community-based alternatives; provider performance and compliance with established standards; and alignment of placement decisions with validated risk/needs assessments.

5. Preserving Local Discretion in Firearm-Related Cases

HB 2329 proposes mandatory detention when a youth possesses or uses a firearm during an offense. We oppose this provision.

Mandatory detention removes the ability of local law enforcement and courts to evaluate individual circumstances and select the safest and most effective response. We support maintaining local discretion in firearm-related cases and oppose automatic detention mandates.

6. Detention and Incarceration Term Lengths

We support increasing the upper limit of incarceration to 24 months to allow flexibility in serious or repeat cases.

However, we do not support increasing the minimum incarceration term from six to twelve months, as this removes discretion to use shorter-term placements when appropriate.

We support juvenile justice reform that improves outcomes for high-risk youth while protecting public safety and preserving progress made since SB 367. With clear definitions, phased implementation, protection of community-based services, preservation of local discretion, and transparent reporting, HB 2329 can better achieve its intended goals.

Thank you for your time and for your continued commitment to building safer, stronger communities across Kansas.