

Rita Weltsch
Proponent Testimony for SB 358
to the Kansas Senate Judiciary Committee
February 4, 2026

In-Person Testimony (Virtual)

Dear Chair Warren and Members of the Committee:

My name is **Rita Weltsch**. I am currently 40 years old and I live in Virginia, where I moved in 2018. Prior to 2018, I lived most of my life in Manhattan, KS. I am writing today in support of **SB 358** and to explain its importance to myself, other victim-survivors, and our future.

The reason this Bill is important revolves around the idea of symbolism. Humanity has always used symbols, from cave drawings to feudal ceremonies to the modern courtroom. Carl Jung argues that symbolism and ritual are one of the essential facets that make us human, that distinguish us from the rest of the animal kingdom.

We teach our children that “actions speak louder than words.” Today, it is your turn to prove the truth in that statement. As the law currently stands, it allows judges to let dangerous, violent criminals to walk the street before sentencing. These aren’t “innocent until proven guilty” situations. These are people who have been found or pleaded guilty to violent crimes. They are criminals, there is nothing left to prove.

Every time a judge allows this, they send a message to society writ large, whether they intend to or not. The courtroom is supposed to be a symbol of justice. But when a violent criminal is allowed to walk out instead of being taken into custody, it becomes a symbol of oppression and further victimization.

When Clark Petersen was allowed to go home the night of his verdict, it was, as Prosecutor Trochek bluntly but accurately put it, “a slap in the face” to his victims. We were all angry and deeply wounded by the decision. This was a person who, before trial began, had no regard for the rules, even having approached one of the victim-survivors in public when he had a restraining order against him. Why would his regard for rules change simply because a verdict was read against him? Short answer, it wouldn’t.

His release symbolized a disregard of our trauma, revictimizing us by showing us that we did not matter, that what we went through under his abuse and the strain of the trial was irrelevant and unimportant. Soon after our trial, another man was released on bond after his verdict. He was given an ankle monitor and the judge cited that he “had family” nearby. How does an ankle monitor protect his victims? How does it prevent him from victimizing others? It doesn’t.

Furthermore, the decision to release a violent criminal symbolizes to the community writ large that their safety is irrelevant. Think about it. How would the community respond if they knew that a convicted rapist was out on the streets simply because “there’s no precedent” or “he has family in the area.” Those aren’t legal justifications. They’re excuses for moral abdication and disregard of victims. If there is no precedent, set it. If the convict has family, near or far, what about the victims’ families?

This isn’t about one or two cases. This is a representation of the harm of rape culture, of prioritizing the culprit, the criminal, over the victims. The evidence had been presented, analyzed, and a verdict rendered. These men have no more rights. In our country, when you violate the rights of someone else,

you lose yours, period. Allowing a proven criminal to go home between sentencing prioritizes their wellbeing, desires, and prior rights over those of the victims.

Victims are the ones whose right matter. Victims have the right to feel safe from their attacker. Victims have the right to know that others will be safe from their attacker. Victims have the right to sleep at night without worrying that their attacker will flee or complete suicide, escaping custody. *We* have the rights. *They* do not.

By passing this Bill, you send the message that aligns with our Constitution and legal principles. You say that the victims matter, that their trauma matters, and that the rights that they actually have trump those that the convict forewent when he committed his crimes and was found guilty. By passing this Bill, you ensure that victims will be able to sleep at night, knowing that their attacker cannot hurt them.

It would be one thing if we were asking you to revoke a judge's ability to issue bond pre-trial. We are not. We are asking that, once the verdict is in or the plea is taken or whatever other condition is met that means guilt, the convicted be remanded into custody through sentencing. That is justice. That is the symbol that tells the community, the State of Kansas, and the country, that Kansans will prioritize those harmed over those who did the harm.

It tells everyone that Kansans will not stand for rape culture or victim/blaming or shaming. It says that Kansans will not use moral abdication as a means of easing their consciences simply because that's the easier route. We will not play Pontius Pilate. We will take responsibility and we will defend victims, not injure them further. In my victim impact statement, I stated that we, the 19+, are not just one tree, rooted in place. We are a forest and we hold the line. We ask that you join us in holding.

I'll leave you with one of my favorite quotes from Clara Barton.

I have an almost complete disregard of precedent, and a faith in the possibility of something better. It irritates me to be told how things have always been done. I defy the tyranny of precedent. I go for anything new that might improve the past.

Join us in defying tyranny and improving our state for ourselves and our progeny.

Thank you for your time and for considering my testimony.

Sincerely,
Rita Weltsch
Former Resident of Manhattan, KS (1996-2018)