

## Written Testimony

January 31, 2022

Chairman Hilderbrand and Committee Members:

My name is Emily DeVaris Schlenker, and I am writing in support of SB276. I am a Kansas resident living in Wichita in Sedgwick County, and I am in district 30.

I delivered my child in 2004, and I strongly considered giving birth at home in order to avoid the very real possibility that I would be put under greater scrutiny by hospital personnel who could not understand how a blind mother would care for her child. I did choose to deliver in a hospital, but I was highly vigilant during and after my delivery, because at any time I feared a social worker or other member of the hospital staff would come in and commence questioning me about how I proposed to care for a newborn without being able to see. It turned out that having a sighted partner seemed to put everyone who might have been concerned more at ease, because I did not have to answer such questions and was able to take my baby home.

I am introducing my testimony in this way to illustrate the genuine fear that many blind parents experience starting in prenatal care and often extending into their children's first years of life. I was fortunate to leave the hospital with my baby in my custody, but that does not happen for all blind parents through no fault of their own.

The greatest challenge I had due to the misconceptions about blind people and their ability to parent arose starting a few weeks after my baby was born when I realized that my mental health was deteriorating. I feared that I was suffering from postpartum depression, and I would have urged anyone who confided in me that they were feeling this way to seek help; however I was overwhelmed with anxiety and a real fear that my asking for help would alarm medical and mental health professionals and be interpreted as an inability to parent my child. I was lucky, because a lot of my mental health struggles resolved in the first 3 years, but I know this is not the case for many mothers. No parent should have to miss what should be some of the most memorable times in their child's development because they fear that there will be such devastating consequences as having a child removed from the home because they asked for help.

If this bill passes parents like me will not have to forgo accessing parenting and mental health resources, because we are afraid of being perceived as unable to care for our children due to blindness.

Thank you for your consideration.