

House Committee on Commerce, Labor & Economic Development
Verbal Proponent Testimony in Support of House Bill 2785
March 7, 2024

Chairman Tarwater and Committee members, the Hutchinson/Reno County Chamber of Commerce represents the voice of over 750 businesses and non-profit members who have identified improved childcare systems as an important factor in our economic success. Today I stand before you in support for HB2785 as an important step to create efficiency in Kansas and to streamline support of the childcare industry. Creation of the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) would demonstrate that you have made young Kansans a priority, as we work to grow our local economies.

I stood before you last week to share how Reno County is tackling the challenges that the lack of childcare and the problems created by having to navigate multiple states agencies to address childcare issues. This has become an issue not only for families, but a workforce retention issue for businesses who need parents to be able to work, but gaps in the childcare system are keeping many workers on the sidelines. Businesses in Reno County ranked childcare as a top concern in the recent Business Conditions Surveys.

Additionally, in a series of public listening sessions across Reno County in 2021, residents identified the top priorities facing our communities. The number one issue identified by this engagement process was affordable childcare and the sustainability of the childcare system. As a result, we went to work in Reno County to determine how to solve our local childcare system deficiencies, but that work cannot be done alone, it must be done in tandem with state agency support. To streamline the system at the state level would be one factor in shouldering that burden that is placed on the current providers who today must navigate the variety of agencies while also managing day to day care of children.

In early 2022, the United Way of Reno County K-Ready Coalition commissioned a team of researchers at K-State to conduct a market study of the Reno County childcare system. The research was funded through grants from the nonprofit contributors who believe in being part of the solution. Through the research in 43 in-person focus groups and over 600 surveys of families seeking childcare, center operators and family providers, many needs were identified. The feedback from centers and family providers revealed a common thread that we believe can be solved by HB2785.

One of the key findings is the shrinking number of home care and center providers. One reason cited was the increasing stress of navigating multiple agency requirements by home daycare providers and centers who are already stretched thin - with shrinking margins, fewer workers, a lack of employee benefits and increased reporting demands. The study cited a shortage of over 1,000 slots in Reno County, and while the recent Accelerator grants are helping fill this void, more needs to be done. The childcare system is in crisis and we need our front line childcare system to be able to more seamlessly navigate the regulatory environment, so they too can thrive and focus on delivering superior care to children.

We collectively ask for your support of House Bill 2785. Thank you for your consideration if this important move to improve efficiency in Kansas. Our full study and findings can be found at www.rallyreno.org.

Respectfully,
Debra Teufel, President/CEO, Hutchinson/Reno County Chamber of Commerce

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