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March 8, 2023

Subject: Testimony in front of

Chair Warren, Vice Chair Wilborn, and Members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to be here today. I am Gina Meier-Hummel and I currently serve as the Executive Director of O'Connell Children's Shelter. As you may or may not know, I have a long history of working in the Kansas Child Welfare System. I am one of a few folks across our state who worked in the system both before and after we privatized child welfare services and I have managed both public and private, large and small child welfare and social service agencies. I am extremely proud of the long history of service O'Connell Children's Shelter has in our local community and our state.

O'Connell Children's Shelter is the merged entity that came from O'Connell Youth Ranch and The Children's Shelter. We are in our second full year as a merged agency, but O'Connell and the Children's Shelter had been operating in our community since 1976 and 1981 so we have been around for 46 years.

Mrs. O'Connell donated the 120 acres the ranch sits on today in Southeast Lawrence. Ironically some 46 years ago, Ms. O'Connell was worried about young men ending up in the jail system. She had great insight about the impact young men in jail would have long term on the family system, and her goal was to create a loving Christian environment where these young men would be safe and stable, but also learn skills that would help them with their future. To this day, while we have expanded who we serve, we operate with these same goals in mind. Safety, stability, and positive youth development.

Several years later, leaders in the community recognized that O'Connell alone could not address all the needs of at-risk youth and The Children's Shelter was created. The primary focus of The Children's Shelter was originally providing emergency services for local law enforcement and local, community-based placement options for families. To this date, we still operate emergency beds for our local community and law enforcement officers. What this looks like is at any hour of the night if a child is removed from their home or is unsafe or in need of a safe place to stay, think of a tragic car accident, young people found vulnerable in Walmart parking lot, a domestic violence situation, the police will drop these youth with us and then we work to find a relative or give the parents a cooling off period to sort out their situation.

By merging, we assured both long-term and emergency placements could continue in our community. We are CARF accredited and offer QRTP services. We now have close to 60 beds we can offer young people in 5 facilities located throughout Lawrence.

We serve youth ages 6-22. We not only ensure our residential youth get their basic needs met, providing a safe and stable environment, but we also are working to ensure we are not contributing to the pipeline from foster care to homelessness or jail by establishing our Bridging Program—exposing the youth to caring adults who can provide the intrinsic community supports foster care often disrupts.

We offer art classes, music classes, gardening, an exercise program, bible study and faith development programs. We have animal care programs, and we host unique events for the youth like fishing outings, trips to Worlds of Fun or the beach, or trips to the plaza. Most of these groups are run by volunteers, or the outings sponsored by generous donors who understand the importance of exposing young people to all the world truly has to offer. The other piece that our bridging program does is work with employers. Employers who want to support young people in gaining valuable job skills and help place our youth exiting the foster care system in good paying jobs. And the final piece to our program includes recruiting coaches and volunteers for our youth aging out of the foster care system so they are not alone when they leave us and truly have a team around them. We want them to have some ongoing support.

In addition to our residential programming, we also offer a handful of prevention programs aimed at really strengthening families and keeping young people in school. We have a long-standing truancy prevention program assuring youth graduate high school. And DCF contracts with us for Intensive in-home services with a 99 percent success rate. We also offer support to foster, adoptive and kin families.

While we are proud of the work we do with our youth, the work is extremely difficult. Most of the youth we serve in residential care have had multiple placement disruptions, most are behind in school, most are on several psychotropic meds, most have had multiple therapists, many are parental rights terminated and have no contact with family and no one to visit on holidays. Most have major trauma histories, mental illness and are highly emotionally reactive. We are highly selective about who we admit into our program as we do not want to add to the trauma, and we will not admit anyone we do not think we can serve. This currently means we do not serve youth with physical violence or youth with violent sexual crimes against others.

The reality is on the referral list every day there are upwards of 80 youth with these extreme histories. As a system, we wonder why we have trouble recruiting folks to be foster parents or retaining high-quality staff for our residential facilities, or the child welfare work force, but we are expecting these folks to deal with extreme and violent behaviors without providing adequate resources and tools. For example, one referral we recently reviewed was asking for a transfer of placement for a 16-year-old youth who wanted out of his current placement because he felt unsafe with the other youth at his placement. He reported they were bullying him, pressuring him to do drugs and commit other crimes. Yet, the referral went on to say, he himself was verbally and physically aggressive and also experiencing suicidal ideation and self-harming behaviors. Another referral listed confirmed gang violence, verbal and physical aggression, defiant behavior—incarcerated for the last 30 months—“we don’t know what to expect when he is released” as he is experiencing dysregulation and self-harming behavior.

My worry really is: who is serving them? The answer is: No one well. I know some will end up in the hospital, some in other facilities, some in one-night stays, and then yes, these are the youth sometimes sleeping in offices. These are the youth that would have charges, and judges, before SB 367, would have had alternative options for.

Despite not admitting youth with violent histories, we have had our share of incidents which takes a toll on staff. We have had two staff attacked physically by youth. (One who broke a sauce bottle over a counter and charged at my staff trying to stab him, and one who physically tackled and punched another one of my staff members.) Thank God each time my staff were highly trained to handle such situations, or this would have ended badly for someone. We have had youth break into our office and steal computers and not get any charges, even though this incident should have been at least two felonies. Often, the responding officers do not even take youth in because they say, "nothing will happen." We also unfortunately have had peer to peer crimes occur, because we were not told about, or the referring agencies did not know about, the violent history of a youth. My point in all of this is—we must equip the system with alternatives so that youth with these extreme delinquent behaviors are not harming other vulnerable children and staff, which we all know is difficult to come by.

O'Connell continues to hire and train staff daily. We want to be a resource for all youth in Kansas and not turn any youth away, but we cannot do it without some additional resources in the system. Therefore, we strongly support the passage of House Bill 2021 and the additional resources it would provide to our toolbox in caring for at risk youth and families in Kansas, especially the crossover youth who interjecting extreme behaviors into our child welfare system.

Thank you for allowing me time to visit with you this afternoon, I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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