

Proponent Verbal Testimony on HB 2536

March 6, 2024

Kristen Nicole Powell
Verbal Testimony in Support of HB 2536
Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare

Chairwoman Gossage and members of the Committee:

My name is Kristen Nicole Powell, I am a legal and policy co-chair for the Kansas SOUL Family implementation team. I am here today to speak in support of House Bill 2536, the SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option.

SOUL family is an important permanency option for young people in foster care and here is why:

- Feeling isolated is a common feeling for youth who enter foster care, especially if they are entering into care because of trauma or violence. My dad moved me and my siblings to Kansas after getting into fights with our family and moving us from both Pennsylvania and Texas. I did not like living with my dad for so many reasons, so at 12 years old running away became my coping skill.
- A month after my 13th birthday I ran away from the Wichita Children's Home after getting into an argument with my dad. While I was there, I met a girl who was turning 18. She told me if I ever run again, just come to her house and gave me her address on a piece of paper.
- Shortly after meeting up with her, I was trafficked. When I was later found by the police, I was interrogated, incarcerated, and placed into foster care.
- Things only got worse for me from here and my long journey to age 18 began. I was labeled "high risk" which meant that I was not allowed any contact with the outside world except when I was in school or on supervised phone calls, no social media, no phone. I was cut off from my community and everyone I knew. The judge also placed a "no run" order on me which meant that if I ran away again, I would have to spend 6 months incarcerated. I felt trapped and isolated, so I just kept running. Months after turning 16 my foster care case was closed, and I was now the juvenile justice system's problem.

SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option would have made a difference for me while I was in foster care:

- 60% of youth emancipate or age out of the Kansas foster care system without legally recognized relationships.
- When you age out of the foster care system as an adult, you are completely alone; if there is an emergency, you don't have anyone to call or rely on for help.
- According to the 2023 Fostering Youth Transition Report, 49 percent of young adults who navigated the Kansas foster care system in 2021 experienced incarceration.
- Compounding this issue is the emergence of an alarming number of day centers for unplaced foster youth being opened across the state. While these centers may be a well-intentioned response to the shortage of suitable placements, it deeply saddens me that we find ourselves resorting to such measures.
- Instead of environments where young people can flourish within permanent, loving families, we are witnessing the rise of temporary solutions that fail to address the core issues at hand. Young people need stable, nurturing homes to thrive.
- SOUL Family would allow young people to build these relationships and figure out who they are close to and keep those people in their lives before they turn 18. It allows youth to have autonomy and choose who they want in their lives and who they can trust most when they need help.
- If SOUL Family would have been an option, I would have had the power to keep people who were important in my life, like my mentor, and this would have helped me to keep these connections so that I could have different options rather than running away when times were hard.
- It is essential for young people to have a network of adults in their lives so they have someone that they trust, they can call when they need help, or just need to talk.
- We are all made for relationships. We are wired for connection with other humans, and we truly can't walk through the world alone. My mentor Dr. Karen Countryman-Roswurm has a quote that I revisit often: "It was love through transformational relationships that changed my life, not the services". Relationships and love help you heal, not services and systems.
- At 18, I was in Kansas alone with no family but I had mentors who poured into my life and brought me into their families. This is how I learned to be a mother, how I learned about unconditional love, and

so many more beautiful life skills that I still use today. Imagine the impact they could have made on me at 16?

- Does anyone here have a young person in their life right now that they love but are not related to? If you answered yes, imagine for one second they were placed in foster care and you had no way to contact them or to stay in their life. How would you feel? What would you do?

Current permanency options in Kansas don't work for every young person;

- Going home wasn't an option for me. My family in Texas didn't want to go through the process of having me go back there. Adoption was not what I wanted. I was too young to be emancipated and when I was 16, I was denied independent living options because I was too "high risk".

I am asking you today to support HB 2536:

- SOUL Family is a new innovative permanency option designed by people with lived experience. This is an opportunity for Kansas to be the first state in the country to do something different for foster youth. SOUL Family gives people autonomy to decide who they want to have in their life and keep those relationships that help them heal and get out of the system.