



**Proponent Testimony on HB 2536 SOUL Family Permanency Option  
Senate Public Health and Welfare  
March 6, 2024**

Chair Gossage, Vice Chair Erickson, Ranking Member Pettey, and Members of the Committee, my name is Rachel Marsh, CEO of the Children's Alliance of Kansas. The Alliance is an association of 19 private, non-profit child welfare agencies that collectively provide a full array of services for children and families in child abuse and neglect prevention, human trafficking, family preservation, foster care, adoption, independent living, and parent, youth, and child skill-building, mental health, and substance use treatment. Thank you for the opportunity to testify as a proponent of HB 2536 about the SOUL Family Permanency Option.

I'd like to begin today by simply offering our support for this bill and introducing the group of people who have been working hard to bring this permanency option to Kansas. It's been a very rewarding and educational experience to work through this bill development process with these leaders who have lived experience in the foster care system. They can offer you a view point I cannot, including the impact a program like SOUL would have meant for them as they left foster care.

The SOUL Family legal permanency option was designed by and for young people who have foster care experience and who understand the need to build permanent, long-term relationships with adults. Creating permanent and legal relationships is an important cornerstone for the successful transition to adulthood, especially when you consider that 50% of young people in foster care nationwide – and in Kansas – age out without achieving legal permanency.

My oldest daughter is in college, and a few times a month, I get a phone call from her with those great questions you may have heard from your kids. When I think of young people aging out of foster care in Kansas and having no one to call and ask how you boil an egg or wash a wool sweater from Goodwill or navigate relationship changes, it helps me to understand how important it is to create the permanent, legal relationships outlined in HB 2536. None of us ever outgrow the need for a family.

Existing legal permanency options — adoption, legal guardianship, and reunification — work for many children but many times do not address the needs of older youth. Too many young people age out of foster care and enter adulthood without a supportive family and critical adult connections as anchors. And for those that do use adoption or permanent custodianship, as older youth, there are significant sacrifices that come with becoming eligible for those options.

The SOUL Family bill was designed to advance four primary goals:

- **Establish lifelong, strong relationships** between a young person and one or more adults that carry the legal status of family relationships. SOUL Family does not require the termination of legal relationships with a young person's biological family. Siblings could be included in a SOUL Family.

- **Maintain young people’s eligibility to receive funding and services that prepare them for adulthood** and ensure their stability, including benefits that support them as they attain education, employment, and housing. In some states, young people in foster care lose access to some forms of assistance if they gain a permanent family. SOUL Family would ensure that these young people do not have to choose between permanent, caring, long- term relationships and the aid needed to prepare them for adulthood.
- **Create a youth- and family-focused support system through the court and the local child welfare agency.** This provides young people and the adults in their lives access to support and the ability to find and manage resources.
- **Include a youth- and family-centered permanency planning process** to ensure that young people understand the short- and long-term implications of all legal permanency options and get the emotional support they need to sort through them and choose the permanency plan that is right for them.

Kansas has the opportunity to be the first state to pilot the SOUL Family Permanency option, as identified in HB2536. Children’s Alliance supports this legislation and the creation of a new permanency option for our young people in foster care.

I want to make sure you have plenty of time to hear from the young people themselves. And if there are questions about the legal technical pieces that do not get answered during the hearing, I am happy to stand for questions at the appropriate time.

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