

March 6, 2024

Gabriella Pogany
Verbal Testimony in Support of HB 2536
Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare

Good morning Chair Gossage, and Members of the Senate Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony in support of House Bill 2536, the SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option. My name is Gabriella Pogany and I am here as one of the Practice and Implementation Tri-Chairs for the Kansas SOUL Family implementation team, an Engage Douglas County Coalition Member, and a Kansas Family First Family Council Representative. I also stand before you with experience as both a child in care as well as a mother who successfully reintegrated with her son through the Kansas foster care system.

At fifteen years old, I entered the foster care system exhausted by the traumatizing mental, emotional, and sexual abuse that culminated in my mother calling CPS to remove me from her home. I have been without a father since age five when suicidal thoughts had overcome him and he ended his life—the worst outcome imaginable. Thankfully, he left me the best grandparents I could have ever asked for, but even with grandparents' rights, and a lot of court dates and legal fees, they could only achieve bi-weekly weekend visitations with me. During the long wait for those weekends, I suffered immensely without a sense of direction or connection.

The SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option would have let me keep what family I had left without burdening them with the financial responsibilities of caring for me. Instead, my family turned away from me. They didn't want to be associated with a system full of barriers such as inflexible licensing, training, and mandatory background checks for every person who entered their home. SOUL would have allowed me to be more engaged in my community, maintain lifelong friends, and stay enrolled in educational programming. I would have had a chance to experience a normal teen life and do things like going to prom or graduating with my classmates. My experience in foster care was incredibly isolating. Having no friends made me run into an abusive relationship and getting out was a long painful journey. As an adult I am still disconnected from my family, I only have a relationship with my father's parents. Bridges were burned through foster care, and then it was my grandma and I versus the world.

60 percent of youth emancipate or age out of the Kansas foster care system without legally recognized adults or permanent families.

SOUL allows youth to take back the control that was taken from them when they entered foster care. I wanted control so badly that I was willing to do anything for it. I was reckless and angry, but under that, I was hurting. I was processing trauma and grieving my childhood. When you are in foster care you have to accept that a lot of experiences that most teenagers have will be taken from you. Part of developing as an adolescent is growing into an individual and planning for a future, but they need help. They need people in their lives who they trust to provide guidance and the tools needed to transition into young adulthood. This is everyone's first time here on earth and everyone needs help. That is why we say "It takes a village."

When I was in care, there was no village. My Grandma was in her late 50s and her kids were grown, asking her to start over at her age was a lot. She was told by the social workers if she wanted me it

was all or nothing. She couldn't take 100% responsibility, but that doesn't mean she couldn't have been more involved. Support can come from parents, relatives, church members, parents of children's friends, etc. There is so much seclusion when you are involved in the foster care system. Even foster parents are stressed and need support. SOUL offers an opportunity for young people to keep the adults who are important to them in their lives.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my testimony with you all this morning, and please reach out to me via email for further questions. Gabriella.Guido.GG@gmail.com