

STATE OF KANSAS

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**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

Chairman Billinger, Vice-Chair Clays, and members of the committee:

I am writing to express my strong support for SB542, which addresses the pressing issues of homelessness and encampments in our state. Before delving into the details of the bill, I want to emphasize what this legislation is not about. It is not about Housing First initiatives. Instead, this bill focuses on two critical aspects: providing adequate homeless shelter space for the purposes of administering wraparound services that transition homeless individuals to independence and addresses the proliferation of homeless encampments.

Over the past two years in the House Welfare Reform Committee, we have gleaned insights into homelessness—what works and what doesn't. Numerous cities across our state have highlighted the scarcity of shelters and insufficient shelter beds. Through extensive discussions, including those in the homeless interim committee last fall, it has become evident that federal funding targets housing rather than shelter infrastructure, which serves as the crucial first step in assisting the homeless.

Secondly, encampments pose multifaceted challenges to both the homeless and our communities. They inflict environmental damage, expose individuals to various dangers such as sex trafficking and drug abuse, and diminish community well-being by negatively impacting businesses and property values.

Given the detrimental effects of encampments, it is imperative to explore practical solutions for their elimination. While there are legal uncertainties surrounding enforcement, SB542 offers viable strategies to address both homelessness and encampments.

The bill allocates **one-time funding** and matching dollar grants for homeless shelter infrastructure, contingent upon fulfilling specific requirements such as providing building plans for congregate and non-congregate homeless shelter infrastructure, wraparound services targeted for Kansas residents or have proof of presence within Kansas for 8 consecutive months, collecting HMIS data, and enforcement of local camping ordinances.

Most importantly, SB542 incorporates a claw-back clause to hold local government accountable for meeting their commitments. It strikes a balance by offering tangible solutions to real problems across our state.

While recognizing concerns from both sides of the aisle, I firmly believe that this bill provides a solid foundation to effectively reduce homelessness.

Finally, we have these amendments prepared to address the expressed concerns in our Welfare Reform Committee hearing:

- Carve out 10% of total grant funds for counties with population of less than 50,000 people.
- Definition of wrap around services to include: any program that serves the vocational, behavioral or physical health needs.
- Reduce total fund for the state to 30 million

-Allow in-kind donations from individuals, private foundations, and private non-governmental entities for the purpose of meeting the matching dollar amount requirement.

As a Republican, I view addressing homelessness as a moral imperative and a pro-life issue. It aligns with principles of personal responsibility and emphasizes the importance of caring for our own. By providing shelter and facilitating access to essential services, we empower individuals to improve their circumstances.

Failure to act will only exacerbate the homelessness crisis in our state. SB542 presents an opportunity to proactively address this issue without being reliant on court rulings. I urge you to support this bill and take meaningful steps towards combatting homelessness and enhancing community well-being.

Thank you for your attention,

Representative Leah Howell
District 82