



Testimony of the Coalition to End Homelessness in Wichita / Sedgwick County Neutral Testimony on Senate Bill 542

Members of the Senate Ways and Means Committee:

We are board members of the Coalition to End Homelessness in Wichita/Sedgwick County. Our Coalition, comprised of over 500 individuals, 19 organizations, and 19 board members shares a single vision: to make homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring for all our neighbors in Sedgwick County.

We believe ending homelessness requires a comprehensive approach. While we understand that the Coalition would be ineligible to apply for the proposed \$40 million for emergency shelter infrastructure funding, we believe that this funding would help reduce and end homelessness across Kansas. However, we also believe it's crucial to support the entire housing and homelessness ecosystem in Kansas.

Firstly, we need more housing options across income brackets to keep housing affordable and accessible. Affordable, accessible housing is the foundation for a healthy community and the most effective tool for ending and preventing homelessness.

Secondly, essential services are needed. Our unhoused neighbors require pathways to obtain state IDs, job training, mental and physical healthcare, and ongoing support to find and maintain housing.

Finally, collaboration across various organizations is vital. We at the Coalition, along with Sedgwick County, the City of Wichita, and the Robert J. Dole VA, have successfully demonstrated the power of collaboration. Through a joint effort, we cut veteran homelessness in half between January 2023 and January 2024, proving that working together accelerates progress.

However, we have concerns about Sec. 2(b)(6) of the bill. As written, it could lead to unnecessary criminalization of people experiencing homelessness who have no alternative but to camp. In Wichita alone, we estimate a shortage of at least 344 emergency shelter beds year-round. Even with the proposed funding, we might still lack sufficient beds to meet the demand.

Therefore, we urge you to consider amending the bill to either remove this item or align it with Wichita ordinance chapter 5.20, which empowers law enforcement officers to enforce the camping ordinance when appropriate shelter is available.

Because this funding is so crucial, we also ask that you add a severability clause to SB 542. If parts of the statute are found to be unlawful, the necessary work of providing an emergency housing response can continue.

Thank you for allowing us to testify on behalf of this bill today.

The Coalition to End Homelessness in Wichita / Sedgwick County Board