



February 22, 2021

John Wilson, President & CEO
Kansas Action for Children
Written & verbal testimony in **support of HB 2371**
House Committee on Children and Seniors

Chairwoman Concannon and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 2371, which would increase access to critical programs that help low-income Kansans put food on the table and pay for child care. My name is John Wilson, and I'm the president and CEO of Kansas Action for Children. Our vision is to make Kansas the best state to raise -- and be -- a child. KAC shapes state and federal policies that improve health, education, and financial outcomes for young children and the adults who care for them, especially those experiencing poverty. I also serve on the Governor's Council on Education and the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund.

The COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession has amplified the extreme hardships that many parents have experienced for years in Kansas due to statutory requirements that restrict access to work and family support programs. HB 2371 is a modest step toward removing those restrictions so that parents and caregivers can put food on the table, enroll their children in child care, get an education, and ultimately regain their financial footing.

Our team has spent decades tracking the well-being of Kansas children, and we noticed alarming trends even before the pandemic began.

- **Too many Kansas children live in poverty.** Statewide, some 101,000 children lived at the poverty line or below¹ in 2019 – the most recent data available. That means a family of three would earn \$21,960 a year or less². More than 40,000 children in the state live in deep poverty, in which a family of three makes less than \$11,000 a year.³
- **Too many families cannot afford child care.** The average annual cost of infant care in Kansas is \$935 per month, according to the Economic Policy Institute. The high cost of child care strains many Kansas families, but particularly low-income, working families.
- **Too many Kansas families don't receive child care assistance.** The child care assistance program helps families pay for child care by providing financial aid to low-income, working families. Research demonstrates families receiving child care assistance are more likely to

¹ <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/43-children-in-poverty-100-percent-poverty?loc=18&loct=2#detailed/2/18/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/any/321,322>

² <https://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty-guidelines>

³ <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/45-children-in-extreme-poverty-50-percent-poverty?loc=1&loct=2#detailed/2/18/false/1729/any/any>

be employed and have higher incomes. Unfortunately, while the benefit is recognized, there has been a steady decline in the number of children participating. This isn't due to a lack of need, but in part statutory restrictions have made it more difficult for parents to apply.

- **Too many Kansas children are simply going without.** In January 2020, the state released a comprehensive needs assessment that describes the early childhood care and education system in Kansas. Information was collected from all 105 Kansas counties and more than 6,000 Kansans. This unprecedented research effort yielded two central findings, one of which was: "Too many young Kansas children grow up in families where basic needs are not met. The struggle to meet basic needs such as food, housing, and health care prevents families from fully meeting their child's developmental needs."⁴

Without meaningful intervention from lawmakers, we expect to see these problems get worse. As if this weren't enough, the pandemic has created incredible social and economic disruption, especially for women. Women are disproportionately represented in low-wage jobs, and working mothers are more likely to reduce their hours or leave their jobs to take on caregiving responsibilities when there are disruptions to child care. More must be done to support working mothers, and the provisions in HB 2371 are a step in the right direction.

Seeing this pressing need, we began having conversations with Republicans and Democrats to identify commonsense solutions that could provide immediate and meaningful improvements for children, working mothers, and parents:

Eliminating child support cooperation requirements for the Kansas Food Assistance Program and Child Care Subsidy Program. Kansas is among the few states that has this provision, as it is not required under federal law for these two programs. This requirement has a chilling effect on participation. There are good reasons why it might not be in a family's best interest to pursue child support; forcing parents to do so may go against their wishes or could put families in danger. Some have been abused by a partner and may feel that they cannot trust the system to maintain their family's safety. While there is a process for applicants to share why child support enforcement could endanger them or their children, the presence of the question is a deterrent.

Exempting students enrolled in public or private K-12 education or postsecondary educational institutions from Child Care Subsidy Program work requirements. The federal government does not require that parents work a minimum number of hours to qualify for child care subsidies. Kansas is one of only 10 states with a minimum weekly work requirement for parents in postsecondary education to be eligible for child care assistance.⁵ Minimum work requirements can make it difficult for parents to maintain eligibility given the unpredictable schedules of low-wage work, especially when combined with school demands.

⁴ <https://kschildrencabinet.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Needs-Assessment-2020.pdf>

⁵ https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/100141/state_child_care_assistance_policies_for_parents_in_education_and_training_0.pdf

Removing requirements and restrictions imposed on students pursuing postsecondary education for the Child Care Subsidy Program. The federal government does not have a lifetime limit for students receiving child care subsidies. It also does not impose conditions about the type of degree pursued or any limitations on both parents attending school.

- Kansas is one of seven states with enforced time limits on postsecondary education or training (24 months). It typically takes longer for students with children to complete their education, therefore these arbitrary limits are harmful.
- Kansas is one of only four states that require students to maintain a minimum grade point average (GPA) while in postsecondary education or training.
- Kansas is one of only two states (along with Oklahoma) that limits “child care assistance for postsecondary education and training to only one parent in the household. Both states required that one parent work during the hours the other parent was in training.”

We don't believe the limits listed above promote work or help parents and children. Instead, they can drive families deeper into poverty. While we believe much remains to be done to help children and families, these simple changes would support our fellow Kansans as we all recover from the pandemic.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 2371 and for creating space for this important discussion. I am happy to be a resource to the committee as you consider your next steps.

Sincerely,


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