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Feb. 22, 2021
Paula Neth, President & CEO
The Family Conservancy
Proponent for House Bill 2371
House Committee for Children and Seniors

Chairwoman Concannon and Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of HB 2371 on behalf of The Family Conservancy (TFC). My name is Paula Neth, President and CEO of TFC.

The Family Conservancy (TFC) believes every child can reach their full potential when we invest in them and those who care for them. The first five years of a child's life mark the most important period of human development – determining emotional resilience, health outcomes, school readiness, and future career success. **We envision Kansas to be a place where every child can experience well-being throughout their lives.**

TFC has been an active advocate for **access to quality, affordable early education** for all Kansas families; additionally, we have provided **mental health therapy and case management services** for over 50 years. The majority of our clients have experienced trauma – many times in the form of domestic violence.

Quality, Affordable Early Education

Beginning in 2018, with funding from the state of Kansas, TFC began assisting Wyandotte County parents in accessing state child care subsidy funds through our Start Young work, **assisting over 100 Kansas families in applying for subsidy, to date.** TFC found that child care subsidy can be a powerful tool enabling families to **build stability and provide better environments for their children during the critical early developmental period.** Without access to stable child care support, parents oftentimes piece together several different options, which – aside from potential health and safety concerns – does not provide the continuity and structure young children need.

TFC's child care subsidy support team has also encountered restrictions that place disproportionate burdens on mothers and their young children. Most notably, the requirement to coordinate with child support services in order to access child care subsidy benefits. An estimated **1 out of every 10 applicants choose not to apply for subsidy due to concerns around pursuing a formal child support case.** In all of our experiences, it has been the mother seeking support.

TFC has seen first-hand how this requirement prevents single mothers and young children from receiving the support they need. After witnessing several mothers abandon the child care subsidy application process upon learning of the child support cooperation requirement, our subsidy support team connected with our team of mental health professionals, who specialize in

psychological trauma and domestic violence. They found a common theme: mothers would forego child support because doing so would put themselves or their family at risk.

Mental Health and Case Management for Victims

As it relates to domestic violence, research shows the most dangerous time for a victim is within the year that they leave the abusive situation. Additionally, it is common for women to remain in an abusive situation for financial reasons. **Requiring a woman to pursue child support in order to get (or retain) child care subsidy benefits, could play a part in her remaining in the abusive situation, or force victims who have fled the violence, to be in contact with their abuser.**

It is important for victims of domestic violence to regain a sense of power and control in their lives. They have lived (oftentimes, years) in a situation where their power and control was stripped from them. They should be able to choose for themselves and their family when and if to pursue child support. **Tying benefits to this choice is manipulative and dangerous.**

In closing, our experience with the current restrictions, specifically **the requirement to cooperate with child support services, diminishes the true purpose of the child care subsidy program.** We support HB 2371, because access to quality child care is a necessity for single parents who are trying to build the stable and nurturing environment their children need. We are committed to removing inequities in our systems and undue burdens which prevent parents from raising happy, healthy children.

We ask that you support HB 2371 and other efforts to increase access to high-quality and affordable child care to all Kansans. Thank you for your time and consideration, and I would be glad to engage in dialog around this topic.

Sincerely,

Paula Neth
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Helping Children. Strengthening Families.

