

Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund  
Prevention Efforts to Mitigate Adverse Childhood Experiences  
and Promote Protective Factors  
House Committee on Child Welfare and Foster Care  
January 17, 2024

Madame Chair and Members of the Committee,

It is my pleasure to offer testimony today in my role as the Executive Director of the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund (Children's Cabinet) concerning Kansas early childhood efforts to prevent and mitigate adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and promote child and family well-being.

By way of background, Kansas was a pioneer in establishing a comprehensive system to support children's needs – as both the first state in the nation to establish a Children's Trust Fund in 1980, and the first state in the nation to devote our state share of the Master Tobacco Settlement funds towards meeting the needs of children and families with the statutory establishment of the Kansas Children's Cabinet & Trust Fund in 1999 (K.S.A. 38-1901 and 38-2101 through 38-2105).

- According to K.S.A. 38-1901(g)(1-7) "the Kansas children's cabinet shall have and perform the following functions:
  - Assist the governor in implementing a coordinated, comprehensive service delivery system to serve the children & families of Kansas
  - Identify barriers to service and gaps in service due to strict definitions of boundaries between departments and agencies
  - Facilitate inter-agency and interdepartmental cooperation toward the common goal of serving children & families
  - Investigate & identify methodologies for combining funds across agency & departmental boundaries
  - Propose action to achieve coordination of funding & services across those lines
  - Encourage & facilitate joint planning & coordination between public & private sectors
  - Perform the duties and functions prescribed by K.S.A. 38-2103, and amendments thereto

The statutes also established the Kansas Endowment for Youth (KEY Fund) and the Children's Initiatives Fund (CIF). Since the outset, strict accountability has been part of the plan for CIF. An annual evaluation process (K.S.A. 38-2103) offers a complete look at how programs serve children and families across the state. For more information, our 2023 Annual Report can be found here:

<https://kschildrenscabinet.org/project/annual-report-2023/>

Currently, the Cabinet leads the cross-agency collaboration between Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), Department for Children and Families (DCF), and Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE), funded by a federal grant, the Preschool Development Grant Birth-5 (PDG). The \$26.7 million three-year implementation grant supports work to act on priorities identified in our five-year state strategic plan for the early childhood care and education system in Kansas, *All In For Kansas Kids*. In late December 2022, we were awarded a new \$4 million PDG planning grant for calendar year 2023 to facilitate an evaluation of progress made with prior PDG grant funding, update our comprehensive statewide needs assessment and strategic plan for continued improvement in our early childhood care and education system. Resources related to our PDG work (including our needs assessments and strategic plan for early childhood in Kansas) can be found on our website at the following links:

Kansas Children's Cabinet  
<https://kschildrenscabinet.org/>

Needs Assessment resources  
<https://kschildrenscabinet.org/all-in-for-kansas-kids/needs-assessment/>

*All In for Kansas Kids* Strategic Plan  
<https://kschildrenscabinet.org/all-in-for-kansas-kids/strategic-plan/>

The Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund seeks to improve the health, well-being, and educational outcomes of Kansas children and remains committed to the hard work of transforming Kansas into a place of opportunity for every child to experience the wonder and promise of positive, nurturing, and safe experiences. Our commitment and actions are guided by community voice and the latest evidence. Central to our approach is an understanding of the science of prevention for supporting children and families to thrive. With an understanding of how early adversity impacts child health and development, we champion and support approaches known to promote protective factors that strengthen families and support healthy child development, preventing and mitigating the impact of adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs.

We appreciate the interest this Committee has in understanding adverse early experiences.

### **Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences and Promoting Well-Being**

Experiences early in life are primary drivers of child development, health, and well-being, in childhood and later in life. When early experiences are characterized as adverse, it is

well-established that children fare worse in the long term. ACEs include a range of experiences that may be traumatic, undermining feelings of safety and parent/child bonding. Experiencing early adversity has been correlated with a wide range of health conditions; social-emotional and mental health challenges; struggles with relationships, work, and finances; and challenges in many other areas of life that are costly to children, families, and communities. Additionally, these effects compound as additional adversities are encountered, amplifying the negative impact of these challenges, altering lifelong health and service needs.

While initially comprising just ten experiences, the definition of ACEs has expanded over more than two decades of research to include a wide range of experiences and conditions with the potential to impact children negatively (See attached document created by Kansas Children's Services League). Together, these experiences represent a wide range of adversities commonly encountered by children and families in our society that may have grave consequences. It is essential we bring our resources to bear to support children and families to prevent ACEs whenever possible and minimize the impact to health and well-being among children and families resulting from ACE exposure when prevention is not possible.

To address ACEs, we must reduce the risk factors children and families experience and promote protective factors that buffer against the harm of chronic adversity. ACEs are a result of numerous risk factors that may occur at the individual, community, and structural levels. Thus, ACEs must be addressed at all levels using innovative and effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Our collaborative work with state and local partners includes re-imagining our collective approach to supporting children and families so that it centers well-being and sets a proactive course for thriving families in our state. The [Center for the Study of Social Policy's Protective Factors Framework](#) identifies five key protective factors as targets for increasing family strengths, enhancing development, and reducing the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. Protective factors known to mitigate adverse early experiences and promote positive child and family outcomes include:

1. Parental resilience to stress, adversity, and trauma.
2. Positive social connections for the parent and child.
3. Parent understanding of child development.
4. Concrete supports such as financial assistance and other concrete goods that help families meet financial and material needs; and
5. Social and emotional competence of children.

Using this guiding framework as a foundation, the Children's Cabinet leverages strategic partnerships with a range of early childhood and child welfare services in Kansas and at the national level to maximize impact toward well-being, reduce barriers, and promote access to prevention services. Our aim is to balance meeting individual family needs while also addressing community and structural barriers in equal measure. The Children's Cabinet serves a key role, making strategic investments and implementing approaches under this

framework that are known to prevent and mitigate the often-dire impacts of early adversity.

It is my pleasure to provide information about some of the strategies currently in place, as well as others in development, to support families so that everyday challenges are resolved before they escalate to crises with costly consequences to child and family well-being.

As the state lead agency for federal **Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP)** funding, the Children's Cabinet supports primary prevention efforts to reduce the likelihood of child maltreatment and promote the well-being of children and families in Kansas. All CBCAP programs target strategies that will increase the likelihood of a child having safe, stable, and nurturing relationships in their families and communities.

Examples of funded Kansas CBCAP programs preventing and mitigating ACEs include:

- **The Kansas Children's Services League's Wichita Crisis Nursery** strengthens families by providing parenting education, respite and emergency short-term child care, and case management. The partners with licensed child care providers to increase non-traditional hours availability. Wichita Crisis Nursery accepts referrals from mental health centers, substance abuse and public health programs, transitional housing facilities, and domestic violence shelters. Case managers conduct intake assessments and promote family protective factors through evidence-based Triple P Positive Parenting Program.
- **Family Resource Center Response Advocate Program** aims to reduce the risk of a crisis, support families who have suffered a disruption that threatens family stability, and to equip families with resiliency skills. Services include home visiting, parenting education, comprehensive case management, and referrals to community-based services to help strengthen family protective factors and prevent child abuse and neglect. Response Advocates work extensively to educate law enforcement about prevention and to facilitate strong collaborations with Early Head Start, Crawford County Mental Health, and local domestic violence shelters. Response Advocates employ the Protective Factors Survey and the Strengthening Families approach.
- **The Pony Express Partnership for Children Family Support Program**, located in Marshall and Washington counties, provides prenatal supports, long-term rental assistance to unhoused families and those at-risk of homelessness, home visiting with comprehensive case management, early intervention screenings, individualized parenting education, resource and referral, and quality child care for second-shift working parents.
- **Preventive Legal Services** in Shawnee County serves families with civil legal needs focused on strengthening families and preventing a gap in legal services from turning into a crisis. Legal services provided by Kansas Holistic Defenders (KHD) focus on supporting families with challenges related to housing and eviction, and accessing benefits to address critical [social determinants of health](#) in order to support and stabilize families with basic needs. One staff attorney and one client advocate support CBCAP programming with legal services and family advocacy.

- **The Kansas Children's Service League (KCSL) Parent-Child Assistance Program, or P-CAP**, is funded by both the Cabinet and Family First Prevention Services through the Kansas Department for Children and Families. P-CAP targets early identification of parents experiencing challenges with substance use and provides intensive, in-home support to families. The goal of this program is to engage the parent in substance use assessment and treatment services, provide recovery support, increase positive parent-child interactions, improve child well-being, and prevent child maltreatment.
- **Southeast Kansas Library System (SEKLS)** utilizes the **Family Engagement in Public Libraries** model. Elements of the model include playdates to provide in-time parenting information and supports for families, opportunities for social interaction and increased parental resilience, developmentally appropriate story times intentionally planned to model interactions for families, and access to play areas which provide safe spaces with developmentally appropriate toys and manipulatives as well as parenting information. This program applies a primary prevention approach to meeting families where they are, in safe, accessible spaces where families feel comfortable asking for help.

Through the Children's Initiative Fund (CIF), the Children's Cabinet also administers the **Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG)** to support an array of comprehensive early childhood programming for families with at-risk children ages birth to five.

ECBG funding supports early childhood care and education services including Pre-K and early learning, child development services, home visiting, family engagement, and mental and behavioral health services. Results from the ECBG evaluation has shown that participation in these programs is associated with improved literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional well-being for children, and positive parenting interactions for adults.

Data-driven approaches help us understand the impact of our work to prevent ACEs. The Children's Cabinet is currently using CBCAP funds to develop a child and family well-being dashboard to demonstrate state-level and community-level strengths and challenges, along with the impact of investing in primary prevention and well-being initiatives. The dashboard will have an interactive map exploring data such as Kansans' access to basic needs, social determinants of health, and protective factors. The indicators will funnel up into a Well-Being Index at the county level and provide information on how each county fares in terms of well-being from a strengths-based perspective. The dashboard will include guidance alongside the data to support communities, and the state, toward strengthening areas of well-being, providing best practices, insights from other communities, and additional resources. We anticipate a rollout of the dashboard next summer.

An important initiative of the All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan is the Kansas Early Childhood Data Trust (Data Trust). This work reflects the commitment of five state agencies (Children's Cabinet, DCF, KDHE, KSDE, Corrections) to use information to improve the quality, effectiveness, and equity of programs and services for Kansas families. By

linking participation in services to the impact they have on children and families across sectors, we can look to the data to ensure accountability and program effectiveness toward preventing and mitigating risk factors, and return on investment. We are able to use the cross-agency Data Trust to conduct authorized studies to more fully understand system impact toward promoting child, family, and community well-being. A full description of the trust can be found on our website at the following link:

<https://kschildrenscabinet.org/data-trust/>

Our initial Data Trust study links Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) and Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) program data with Department for Children and Families (DCF) foster care data to identify the most effective approach in preventing child maltreatment. Initial results revealed that early childhood services act as a powerful protective factor against removal into foster care. Children had a significantly lower likelihood of being removed after receiving ECBG/CBCAP services.

Building on these findings, the research team analyzed the experience of families that received services specifically promoting caregiver strategies to better support their children and themselves. We found:

- Parents enrolled in parent-centered services such as home visiting, case management, and parent education, were 35% less likely to experience a removal to foster care after receiving service.
- These services help build parenting skills, connect parents to needed resources and help make referrals for substance abuse counseling.

Our results suggest that preventive and supportive services help address some of the most common risks for ACES emphasizing the importance of bridging early childhood services and family supports as primary prevention strategies to mitigate challenges before families experience a crisis. To build this bridge, in 2021, Kansas applied for and was selected as one of 22 states to participate in the **Thriving Families, Safer Children** cohort sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Prevent Child Abuse America, the US Children's Bureau, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Casey Family Programs. Our state team includes our Children's Cabinet, DCF, KDHE, KSDE, KCSL, and the KU Center for Public Partnerships and Research. This initiative is intended to collectively reframe our approach to child welfare by creating an intentional, coordinated effort, to invest in a full continuum of prevention programs that strengthen families and promote child well-being to keep families together and children safe from harm. The aim is to intervene before a family reaches a crisis stage so children can thrive within their family with the connections, supports, and resources they need.

For more information on the national program:

<https://www.aecf.org/blog/national-partnership-to-reinvent-child-welfare-expands>

For more information on our Kansas efforts:

<https://kschildrenscabinet.org/tfsc/>

Kansas became one of the first states to implement the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) in 2019 to implement evidence-based programs designed to prevent the need for foster care. Administered by DCF, Family First offers an opportunity to ensure the safety and well-being of children, youth, and families through parent skill building, mental health, substance use, and kinship navigator services. The Children's Cabinet supports DCF's implementation of Family First programs, and together we are focused on integrating and aligning our programs into a comprehensive continuum of prevention services at the statewide and community level. We also collaborate with our partners at KDHE to align our prevention efforts with maternal and child health priorities, including screening for child development, maternal depression, and substance use in order to stabilize and intervene early.

Family First Prevention Services (FFPSA) fund programs and services that focus on keeping children safely in their homes with their families whenever possible. Kansas data bears this out. Since October 2019, through June 2023, Kansas Family First has received 4,280 referrals. **Of families served, only 6% of children or youth have been placed in foster care during an open Family First case. Eighty-nine percent of children and youth who have reached 12 months from the time of service referral, remained together at home without the need for foster care.**

The statewide warmline, 1-800-CHILDREN, administered by KCSL and supported by Preschool Development Grant and Community Based Child Abuse Prevention funding, serves as a centralized access point for information, support, and referrals 24/7. A comprehensive resource directory (using a tool called Find Help) complements the warmline with robust, up-to-date information on services in Kansas to increase access to family support. In 2022, the Department for Children and Families integrated 1-800-CHILDREN into the Kansas protection and reporting center (KPRC) to provide an alternative source of support in situations where child safety is not a concern. Additionally, after calls to the KPRC, all callers from mobile devices will receive an automated text message with a link to 1-800-CHILDREN, further promoting access to services for families that mitigate risk of harm resulting from early adversity.

For Kansas to be the best place to raise a child, we need to work across sectors to develop a healthy ecosystem where all can thrive. If you would like more information about any of the initiatives mentioned, please reach out. We look forward to seeing the results and using them to inform our approaches for the early childhood care and education system.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to stand for questions.








## What are Adverse Childhood Experiences?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) include abuse and neglect as well as other household dysfunctions or circumstances that affect children adversely. The childhood trauma stemming from early adversity has a profound impact on social connections, school readiness and long-term health problems.

### HOW DO ACEs AFFECT HEALTH?



**INCREASES PROBLEMS**  
with learning and memory that can be permanent

**REDUCES MENTAL ABILITY**  
to respond, learn and problem solve causing problems in school and work

**CAUSES DIFFICULTY**  
in relationships and making friends

**LOWERS STRESS TOLERANCE**  
that can lead to behavior issues, fighting, defiance or checking out

**AMPLIFIES STRESS HORMONES**  
that affect the body's ability to fight infection

### ACEs CAN INCLUDE:

- Emotional, physical and sexual abuse
- Emotional and physical neglect
- Violence in the household
- Household substance use
- Household mental illness
- Parental separation or divorce
- Loss of a loved one
- Incarcerated household member
- Bullying (by children or adults)
- Witnessing violence
- Witnessing sibling abuse
- Racism, sexism, or discrimination
- Homelessness and extreme poverty
- Natural disasters and war

Exposure to ACEs can cause health problems such as depression, adolescent pregnancy, substance and alcohol use disorder, heart and liver disease, intimate partner violence, STDs, smoking, suicide and more.

### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Although ACEs are damaging, science also shows that providing stable, responsive, nurturing relationships can prevent or even reverse the damaging effects of early life stress with lifelong benefits for learning, behavior and health.



## How Can We Build Healthy, Positive Experiences?

Research has shown that Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) can help protect against and even reverse the poor health outcomes and damaging effects associated with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Parents, teacher, and caregivers can help children build resilience by acquiring expertise in creating positive experiences. *Children and adults need our help to promote healthy, positive experiences.*

### Promote the positive to reverse and repair the damages of ACEs!



#### 1. RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Parents and caregivers should model healthy, nurturing relationships for children. Children need supportive relationships in order to develop into healthy and resilient adults. Connection with parents, caregivers, teachers, coaches and mentors will help children feel supported in their growth and development.



#### 2. SAFE AND STABLE ENVIRONMENTS

Children need safe, equitable and stable environments for living, playing and learning. Children are at their best when they are in an environment where their basic needs are met; they feel physically and emotionally secure; and they feel valued.



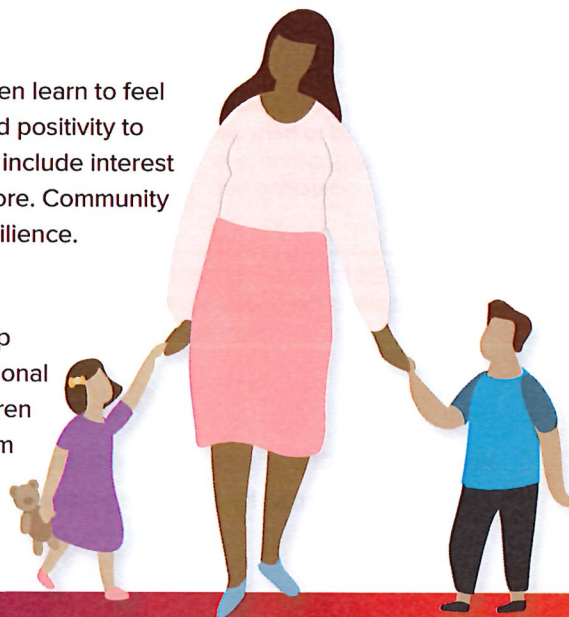
#### 3. SOCIAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Community connection and engagement help children learn to feel loved and appreciated. Then, they are able to spread positivity to those they interact with. Community connection can include interest groups, activities, cultural or religious groups and more. Community connections have a positive impact on children's resilience.



#### 4. EMOTIONAL GROWTH

Children need guidance and opportunities to develop self-awareness and social cognition along with emotional regulation and healthy behaviors. Working with children to understand and name their emotions will help them grow into emotionally healthy and resilient adults.



You can help Kansas families and children by supporting evidence-based programs that put families first, strengthen families and provide a foundation for healthy child development.