



United Community Services of Johnson County

Testimony to Commerce, Labor and Economic Development Committee

March 4, 2015

HB 2381

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United Community Service of Johnson County (UCS) is a nonprofit agency focused on improving the quality of life through human service strategies. As the committee considers HB 2381, we offer two recommendations

Allow drug felons to qualify for food assistance: Section 9 (13) of the bill would reverse a position held by Kansas since the passage of welfare reform in 1996. Kansas, along with 41 other states, currently opts-out of the federal provision of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) that denies food assistance to people convicted of drug related felonies.

We believe that Kansas should continue to allow persons convicted of a drug felony to be eligible for food assistance. For formerly incarcerated individuals transitioning back to their home communities, food benefits can help to meet their basic needs while they are searching for jobs or housing. By doing so, the likelihood that they will return to criminal activity to secure food or other essentials for themselves or their families is reduced. Studies have shown that the unavailability of resources, including food assistance, increases recidivism rates among individuals with a drug offense.

Strengthen work components to achieve positive outcomes: HB 2381 Section 9 (3) and (4) calls for DCF to maintain a “sufficient level of dedicated work program staff” and work components that lead to “competitive, integrated employment.” We believe that in order to achieve successful outcomes for TANF recipients, 1) DCF must spend a larger share of TANF resources on activities designed to prepare TANF recipients for work, 2) programs must be designed to address the specific employment barriers of TANF recipients, and 3) staff must have the necessary training and expertise to work with this population. Kansas only spends about four percent of its total TANF budget, or about \$7 million, on work related activities and supports. To achieve sustainable job placements rather than simply finding employment, a greater investment is required. Evidence-based employment strategies should be implemented. The partnership with Workforce Centers should be expanded. A report by The Council of State Governments, “Workforce Development Success Factors,” identifies 10 principles for successful workforce development. Those factors include tailoring services to individual needs and recognizing that participants face more challenges than just employment, such as mental health, child care and transportation.

Submitted by: Karen Wulfschuhle, Executive Director