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**Testimony by Rabbi Moti Rieber, Executive Director of Kansas Interfaith Action,
in opposition to HB 2600, “AN ACT concerning public assistance”**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee—

My name is Rabbi Moti Rieber, and I am Executive Director of Kansas Interfaith Action, a statewide, multi-faith organization that “puts faith into action” by educating, engaging and advocating on behalf of people of faith and the public regarding critical social, economic, and environmental justice issues. I am here today in opposition to HB 2600.

As people of faith and religious commitment, we are called to stand with and seek justice for people who are poor. Central to our religious traditions, sacred texts, and teachings is a divine mandate to side with and protect the poor. Thus the scripture says:

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs.

If one refuses to help the needy, the scripture continues:

He may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin . . . Give generously to him [the poor] and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (Deuteronomy 15:7-11, NIV).

Clergy who are members of my organization belong to denominations that have developed principles to guide the now nearly 20-year-old project of welfare reform. A representative example is the United Methodist Church's Principles of Welfare Reform, adopted in 1996 and amended and readopted in 2004 and 2008, which can be found Book of Resolutions. I've included the whole document as an addendum to my testimony, but some of the principles there include:

- having poverty reduction as a central goal;
- adequate state and federal funding for welfare;
- providing training and education necessary for unskilled workers to get and hold jobs;
- making sure that former welfare recipients receive at least as much from working as they received from welfare;
- not imposing time limits on people who are complying with the rules of the program; and
- making sure the state provides access to counseling, legal assistance, and information on eligibility for child support, job training and placement, medical care, affordable housing, food programs, and education.

Similar statements of principle, covering many of the same points, have been produced by the Jewish Council of Public Affairs and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, among others.

In other words, religious denominations from across the spectrum have long urged that welfare reform be handled carefully, so that it helps those in need and does not hurt them. They encourage both state and federal governments to take not a punitive approach of this legislation, but, to quote the United Methodist Church, “to protect the right of all people to dignity and well-being, to improve education and training opportunities, and to ensure a safety net for the most vulnerable among us.”

Kansas Interfaith Action opposes HB 2600 because it, and its predecessor legislation last year, does not comport with these principles. It does not address the causes of poverty, and does not help people raise themselves out of poverty, but rather presumes the bad intentions of people in need and makes them jump through all kinds of hoops in order to get the little bit of help that this legislation is willing to give them.

This bill seems like a classic case of a solution in search of a problem. Has anyone ever won \$10,000 in the lottery while receiving TANF payments? So why does it need to be legislated? Why do we need to spend over \$1 million of state money to make sure it doesn't happen?

Increasing red tape and work requirements are not the same as addressing poverty. The current federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. That means a full-time minimum wage employee earns \$15,080 annually. In 2012, the poverty threshold for a family of three was \$20,160. Therefore, a single parent with two children working a minimum wage job full-time would earn below the federal poverty line. And who cares for her children while she's working that job? Who's helps them with their homework or makes sure they stay out of trouble? Are these not also in society's interests? Where does this bill, or last year's bill for that matter, address any of that?

Self-reliance is a goal we all share. According to the great Jewish sage Maimonides, the highest degree of charity is to aid a person in need by “providing work for him so that he may become self-supporting, without having to ask people for anything.” The question is how to do that.

If this legislature is truly interested in addressing the needs of the 1 in 6 Kansans who are below the poverty line, or the 460,000 Kansans who are food insecure, there are in fact ways to do it:

- The state could use the leverage of TANF to connect households in need with low-cost, no-fee bank accounts. This would address the onerous ATM fees that were the result of last year's bill, as well as connecting Kansas families to the banking system, a key step in making economic progress.
- Kansas could prioritize and adequately fund job training and child care, helping unskilled workers get the skills they need to lift themselves out of poverty, rather than simply demanding that people work a dead-end job that won't even pay the rent.
- And Kansas could raise the minimum wage, so that even low-skilled workers could bring home enough to support their families and get ahead economically.

All of these would do more to lift people out of poverty than the misguided and, I would say, mean-spirited welfare reform bills we see coming out of this legislature year after year.

In conclusion, Kansas Interfaith Action opposes HB 2600 because it addresses a problem that in all likelihood doesn't exist; because it does nothing to address and alleviate poverty, and is thus ineffective; and because it does not affirm the value and dignity of the people involved, but rather accuses and implicitly blames poor people for their condition. It is therefore, in my opinion, ungodly. I urge you to defeat it.

Thank you for your attention.

Addendum: United Methodist Church, *Principles of Welfare Reform*