

KANSAS MENTAL HEALTH COALITION

An Organization Dedicated to Improving the Lives of Kansans with Mental Illnesses

March 19, 2024

Chairman Billinger and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to address your committee today on behalf of the Kansas Mental Health Coalition (KMHC).

KMHC is pleased to support the funding recommended by the Governor for \$40 million to establish the Local Government Housing Security Grant Fund. This is one time funding to provide matching grants to local governments to establish local housing resources.

We encourage the committee to amend SB 542 beyond emergency shelter beds, to allow multiple communities to submit proposals based on their specific community needs.

Cities are struggling to increase access to affordable housing while also addressing public concerns associated with unhoused people. People who are unhoused or lack stable housing and those leaving jails, prisons, psychiatric facilities and nursing homes often need support to access housing the treatment supports needed to live independently. The agencies that provide this support often encounter barriers when a person is ready to engage in treatment and supports because of their past interactions with law enforcement. The circumstances that lead to housing insecurity can range from losing employment due to a disability or losing a lease due to hospitalization or moving out of the home due to abuse.

All too often we are providing housing vouchers to Kansans with disabilities but there aren't any homes available to use the vouchers. The need is growing among our veterans, patients leaving hospitalization or nursing facilities, and aging Kansans. This is a nationwide issue that is not going away and we urge the Legislature to take action to assist communities that are working to provide on the ground solutions.

Cities and community-based agencies need access to state and federal funding and support for their efforts.

In addition to people who are unhoused at any given time, many individuals are at imminent risk of losing their housing. Mental illnesses and substance use conditions, and other disabilities, create additional challenges for those who lack stable housing. The resources added by HB 2723 will provide options in those communities.

Why this matters: There are more people with mental illnesses in prisons and jails than in the public and private mental hospitals combined. Supportive Housing programs are effective to create stability outside of these institutions when implemented using Housing First principles and supportive housing practices. These programs rely on public funding to provide vouchers to rent affordable apartments and houses along with treatment and supports.

These programs are evidence-based, proven strategies to assist persons with mental health conditions, even those with severe symptoms, to live safely in the community and avoid homelessness, psychiatric hospitalizations and involvement in the criminal justice system.

The bottom line: This committee heard a detailed report from Andrew Brown, KDADS Deputy Secretary, about the current agency programs. The successes of these individual programs are known. However, there is a lack of housing units available in most communities. This matching grant would enhance current efforts, impact more people, and improve the effectiveness of our current programs by increasing actual housing space.

When a continuum of care exists to serve people at their current level of need – offering support at the time it is most effective – people are less likely to cycle in and out of crisis services and institutional care. It makes other services in the continuum more effective.

A continuum of housing resources that includes emergency shelters, transitional housing, and permanent housing with supports, is key to moving individuals beyond shelter beds into self-sufficiency. There are no housing options in Kansas that are provided without any level of personal accountability associated with the program. These programs help individuals gain the skills needed to live in the community.

The Coalition commends the Legislature for implementing continued improvements to the behavioral health continuum of care. Please amend and pass HB 2723.

Thank you for your consideration.
Coalition

Kansas Mental Health

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