



Child Welfare and Foster Care
February 27, 2025
HB 2294
Office of Early Childhood
Neutral-Written Only

Thank you Chair Tarwater, Vice Chair Turk, Ranking Minority Member Sawyer-Clayton, and Members of the Committee for providing me this opportunity to share information about the Kansas Children's Service League (KCSL), a private, non-profit, 501(c)3 operating in Kansas since 1893. We are the Kansas Chapter for Prevent Child Abuse America (PCAA). KCSL works every day to create, repair and restore healthy parent-child relationships which are the foundation of a strong family. As the state chapter for PCAA our charge is to prevent child abuse. We know the best way to prevent child abuse is to teach and support parents right from the start of their parenting career. KCSL achieves this through a wide array of family services and supports.

Recent research in the field of child abuse and neglect focuses on the impact Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can have. **ACEs include abuse and neglect as well as other household dysfunctions or circumstances which affect children adversely, including substance abuse, mental illness of a parent, domestic violence, and criminal behavior-all of which place a child at higher risk of entering the foster care system.** The childhood trauma stemming from adversity has a profound impact on social connections, school readiness, and the increased likelihood of developing negative coping mechanisms. These maladaptive coping skills have an impact on our larger society in terms of health-related costs, worker productivity costs, and criminal justice costs as these children become adults.

Although Adverse Childhood Experiences are damaging, **science also shows providing stable, responsive, nurturing relationships in the earliest years of life can prevent or even reverse the damaging effects of early life stress, with lifelong benefits for learning, behavior, and health.** Additionally, we also know children under the age of three are at the highest risk of death due to abuse or neglect than any other age group of children. **These children are at high risk because they do not have the ability to tell anyone what may be happening in their home environment.** This is further exacerbated in Kansas with an early childhood network that is difficult to navigate for parents needing to access those services.

Home visitation is a key strategy for supporting families and preventing the need for foster care. Healthy Families America is an evidence-based intensive home visitation program provided by KCSL. The program promotes positive parent-child interactions and healthy attachment, and assistance to help the family gain economic self-sufficiency. Families are visited at least weekly during their first 6 months in the program; at that time depending on how they are doing they may move to visits occurring twice a month. Families can return to weekly visits if they experience a crisis and need additional support for a period of time. Visits occur in the home and have two purposes. The first is to help the parents better understand child development and to ensure they are doing things with their infant to further his/her development both physically and intellectually, things like tummy time and



the importance of reading. The second is to help the parents become more self-sufficient by helping them obtain their goals. These may be broad in range from obtaining their high school diploma or GED; to enrolling in college or technical courses; to learning how to budget on a limited income; learning how to fill out an application for employment and how to interview.

Over 50% of the parents referred to this program are struggling with one or more of the following risk factors: substance use; mental illness; unemployment; domestic violence; or unresolved trauma from child abuse. **Despite these parental risk factors, in 2024 96% of the 827 families served in this program through KCSL were not placed into foster care and remained safe at home.**

Currently funding for Healthy Families is blended and braided with funds from the following state departments:

Department for Children and Families:

- Families First Prevention Services-Parent Skill Building
- TANF

Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund:

- Early Childhood Block Grant

KCSL has the opportunity and the privilege to work with many local leaders across the state in the early childhood arena. We have seen how local early childhood providers work diligently to ensure there is not a duplication of services or efforts. We have also seen firsthand how there is not a unified place for those collaboratives to funnel concerns when a gap or barrier is identified. The proposed Office of Early Childhood would provide this mechanism. KCSL also has a unique opportunity to interact with Healthy Families programs across the nation. Through those interactions, KCSL has learned a unified home visitation system is not only beneficial for families but assists providers as well-ensuring the focus of quality services. KCSL believes Kansas can continue to improve our current home visitation system, by strategically leading providers, identifying common barriers and gaps, and finding creative solutions to ensure families receive the services they need right from the start.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with information regarding the Office of Early Childhood and the potential impact on home visitation in the state of Kansas. KCSL believes the streamlining of programs and their administration as outlined in HB 2294 will provide the opportunity to improve the lives of children ages 0-5, who need our help.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gail Cozadd".

Gail Cozadd, CEO
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KCSL is accredited through Healthy Families America. We have 12 offices serving 44 counties in Kansas through Healthy Families-KS.