

Subject: TESTIMONY FOR HOUSE BILL 0587 v1

I, Tara A. Fields, am a clinical social worker and former Army active duty and Kansas National Guard soldier. I now own a private therapy practice, T Fields Trauma Therapy & Training and I am a military spouse of an active duty senior leader. About 70% of my practice I serve either military members, their family members, or am seeing veterans associated with the VA Community Care Network.

When Shawn Chauncey, Congressman out of the 65th Congressional District, my hometown of Junction City, contacted me about this bill, I felt compelled to share a couple of patient's stories with you that would have directly benefitted from having this provision already in place.

Fort Riley is home to over 11,000 active-duty troops in our region. What many people don't understand is that Fort Riley is special for many reasons, but one that doesn't get talked about much is that Fort Riley and very few other military installations, are able to be an option for soldiers that have family members or children enrolled in what is called the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP). Fort Riley and the surrounding medical infrastructure allows for soldiers to be stationed at this base for access to services. With that we also must be aware that their family members are coming with them and some of which have challenges they are faced with. Examples of why a soldier would have to enroll say their children into the EFMP program are for conditions such as learning disabilities, medical challenges or illnesses that require more specialized care etc.

This is the primary reason for me backing this addendum to this bill. Military soldiers and family members are already faced with enough challenges as it is with frequent moves across the country and world, that the soldier and the family should not also be worried about being able to get their children enrolled in a timely manner or having to wait until they are on ground in Kansas. This places them at a huge disadvantage when it comes to things like getting their children enrolled in school, scheduling assessments such as for Individualized Education Plans (IEP), or 504 plans etc.

Part of my role as a therapist working with this population is to in part be an advocate on their behalf and to help break through barriers that prevent ease of transition for these families among other challenges.

A bill such as the one that they are trying to pass or create this addendum to, would have really helped one military family I supported several years back in Abilene. The father had transitioned out of the military and settled in the Abilene area. When they arrived in the district, they were told that it would be 18 months before the two boys would be able to even be assessed for an IEP. They were so backlogged and they didn't have their own resources in the USD 435 district, that they had to contract from Salina schools to bring their psychologist over to conduct the IEP evaluations placing these children (and others behind the power curve and set them back 18mo).

I have more recently been working with a dual military couple in Manhattan whose young son was born with several health challenges and has had over 20 surgical procedures in his young life. Obtaining an IEP and getting the school district to start understanding the severe barriers and challenges this young student was faced with and instead they were labeling him a malingerer and the parents at first as educationally neglecting their son because of how much school he was missing. I was able to coordinate a meeting with the parents, teachers, administrators and school psychologist to share my vantage point with this family and we were able to break through some of the barriers to collaborate with and for this family and to support this young learner.

Not only do we need to ensure that families moving from other areas are able to get the ball rolling before enrolling new students, but we also must offer and outline other challenges pertaining to educational barriers that exist for not only our military children, but for all Kansas Children to freed from the burden of the barriers that exist for all.

For any of the committee members that may have any further questions or comments, you can reach me either at tfields@t4therapy.org or by calling me directly at (785)210-7707.

Sincerely,

Tara A. Fields, LSCSW

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Former KSARNG Behavioral Health Officer (resigned)