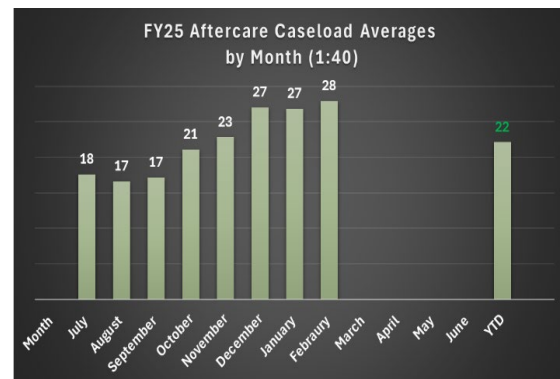
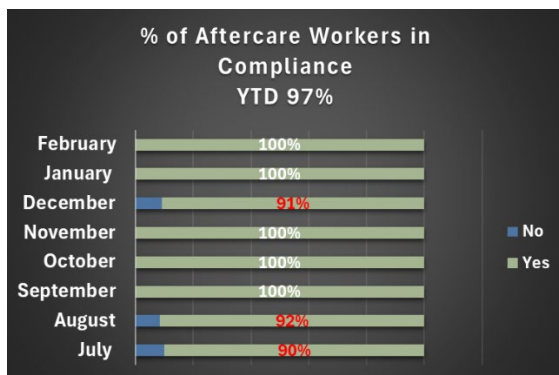
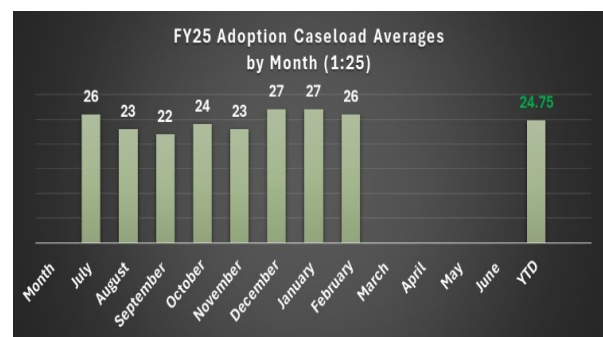
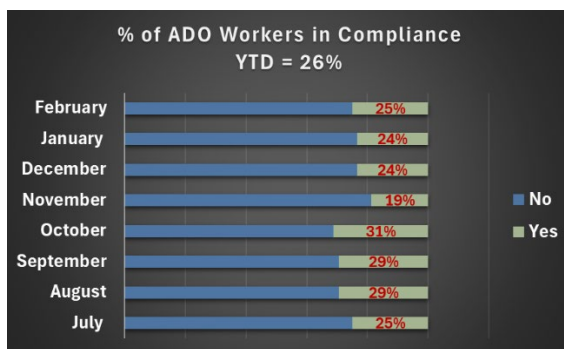
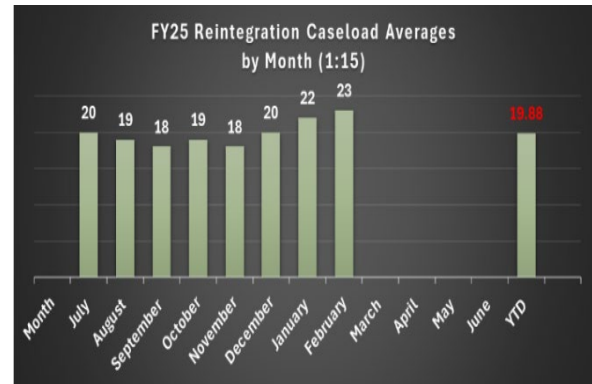
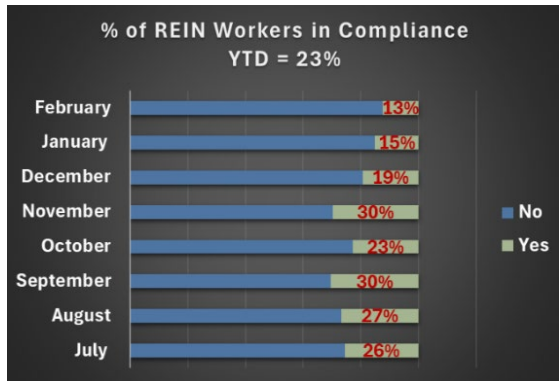




Chairperson Gossage, Vice Chair Howerton, and Ranking Members of the Joint Committee on Child Welfare System Oversight Committee thank you for the opportunity to provide an update. EmberHope is a faith-based nonprofit with over 95 years of service in Kansas. EmberHope Connections (EHC) is the foster care case management provider for catchment Area 7, Sedgwick County, as of July 1, 2024. We previously held the foster care contract from 1997 to 2013. Through implementation, we focused on evidence-based practices, such as Team Decision Making, Family Finding, Safe Generations, and the Kansas Crossover Youth Model. We developed a family engagement center with a sensory-focused playground to enhance the quality of parent-child visits in a safe environment. Additionally, EmberHope Youthville recently opened a new residential program and was selected to develop Therapeutic Family Foster Homes (TFFH) in Sedgwick County to support high-needs children through enhanced therapeutic foster care. Collectively, we remain innovative and are committed to advancing Kansas's goals for timely permanency, improving outcomes for dually adjudicated youth, and systemic improvement across the child welfare system.

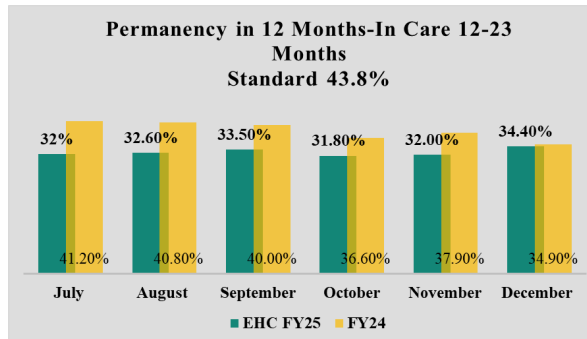
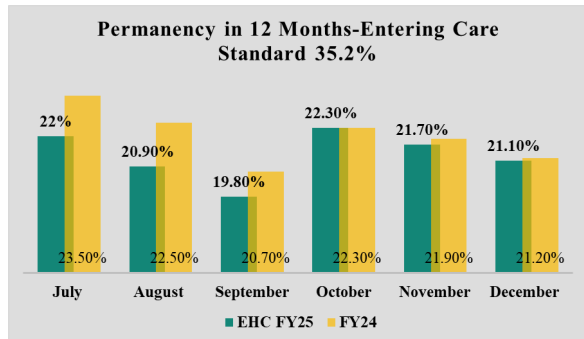
We are all familiar with the workforce challenges and the impact of staff shortages on our ability to serve our populations effectively. Despite not being fully staffed since the contract's inception, we are committed to recruiting staff to meet DCF caseload requirements. Per the data reported below, the current caseload average for caseworkers in reintegration is twenty-three youth (YTD 19.88); adoption is currently twenty-six youth (YTD 24.75); Independent Living is currently twenty-four youth (YTD 18.25); and Crossover is ten youth (YTD 6.38). Aftercare complies with an average of twenty-eight youth (YTD 22). We are 4.88 cases, on average, away from complying with the reintegration ratio and continue to work hard to meet this metric.



We currently have seventy-six case-carrying positions with fifteen vacancies that we are urgently trying to fill. We have nineteen case-carrying social workers, and only three are licensed. We have a robust spring recruitment strategy and are partnering with local Schools of Social Work to increase the quality of casework practice and the number of licensed applicants. The strategy includes an Internship to Employment opportunity for springtime graduates from a local university. We continue to recruit staff from closely related degrees, in addition to licensed staff. We encourage the help of the Joint

Committee to continue to urge Kansas colleges and universities to promote child welfare careers, including creating an associate's degree or other certificates related to the child welfare system.

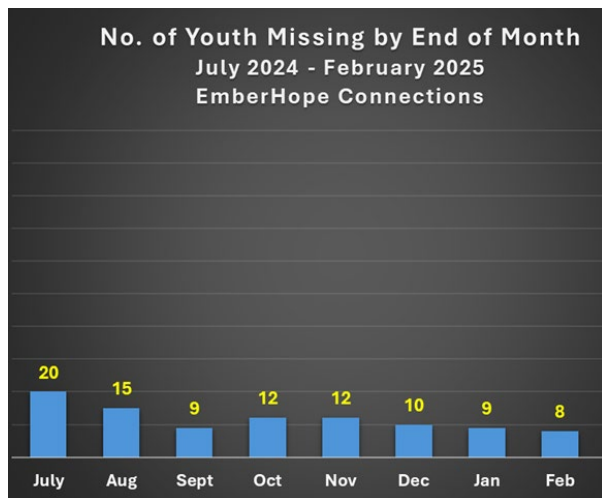
We aim to meet all federal and state permanency outcomes in our first year as a CMP. Currently, the data below reflects our first-year performance. Permanency in 12 months or less is 21.1%, under the 35.2% standard; Adoption in less than 24 months is currently at 25%, just below the 26.8% standard. Permanency in 12 to 23 months is 34.4% below the standard of 43.8%. Permanency for 24 months or more is 28.7% below the standard of 37.3%. To address contract performance, we have implemented several improvement initiatives, including increasing case-carrying resources, reducing the span of control for contract leadership, and training resources. As depicted below, we are on target with FY24 performance in our first nine months.



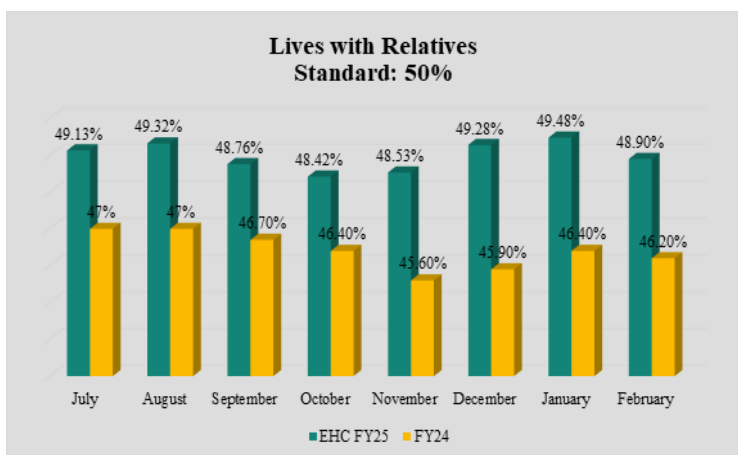
We are launching more robust family-finding efforts to improve timely permanency and complete kinship assessments earlier. We are meeting our initial mental health assessment standards at 95%. We are collaborating with our court partners in Sedgwick County to streamline court processes, having more frequent permanency and review hearings, and adhering to Adoption and Safe Family Act (ASFA) requirements for termination of parental rights to be addressed by the court at 15 months.

In March, we successfully placed forty-five youths in long-term placement (not including kinship placement). Noteworthy is that seventeen of the forty-five youth were previously experiencing Overnight Placement. Since July 1, 2024, we have made 639 long-term placements. Our child welfare population remains steady at approximately 1,350 youth. We have received fifty-one new referrals in March and 410 referrals since the contract started. One success in the number of youths placed is attributed to adding two Referral Specialists who write updated referrals for youth placement consideration. Additionally, DCF has begun meeting with all CMPs, Child Placing Agencies (CPA), and Residential Providers to address overnight placements to eliminate the practice statewide.

At the beginning of the contract, twenty youths were reported as runaway from placement. We have decreased this by 60%; currently, we have eight runaway youth. Our Human Trafficking/Rapid Response Coordinators partner with local law enforcement and DCF and follow the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's Guidance to locate youth and reengage them in care daily. They also use an unmarked car to search prime areas and assist in recovery operations daily.



We have experienced success expanding our family-finding efforts by increasing our kinship placements. We are prioritizing early kinship placements through our Family-Finding department. Based on the chart below, we are within 1% of meeting the performance standard, with the goal of exceeding it. We recently purchased a robust search engine to aid our efforts.



**Please note that all State Outcome data is strictly DCF data that has not been reconciled since 7.1.24. EHC has submitted 80% of outcome reconciliation data from July 2024 – Jan 2025 to DCF as of 3.25.25. All data includes the life of each case before and after the contract start date of 7.1.24.*

EHC is committed to fully upholding Gail Finney's Foster Care Bill of Rights. The youth voice remains a priority so that every child feels respected and actively involved in the decisions made about their care. When possible, we ensure that they live in a safe placement with siblings, have their belongings, have access to extracurricular activities, are notified of court hearings, meet with their Guardian Ad Litem, and can complete the youth court report when appropriate. Youths exiting care at 18 complete a transition into adulthood plan; they are assigned to a DCF Independent Living Coordinator and complete an exit interview before being released from custody. After the release of custody, they are provided aftercare services by EHC.

Educational stability remains a priority for EHC. To strengthen our efforts and relationship with the public school system, we have four Education Liaisons that ensure immediate enrollment by following the Educational Stability Process Map and completing a Best Interest Determination (BID), as defined by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). We ensure the timely transfer and implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEP), 504 plans, and Behavior Intervention Plans. We advocate for the youth in our care, coordinate transportation to and from school, and apply for Educational Advocates through Families Together, Inc. in cases where parents are unavailable to make educational decisions.

We recognize the importance of children in care attending school and their right to an education. On the first day of school, we enrolled 960 school-aged youth, with 956 (99%) attending school. Of the 956 students attending school, 307 have IEPs, eighteen have 504 plans, and 199 have an Educational Advocate. During this school year, eight youths were expelled, and we attended expulsion hearings if notified. We have participated in several school hearings, resulting in reassignments to fit the youth's educational needs better. This year, we have sixteen graduates, and we are on track for fifty out of sixty-three seniors to graduate, which is a 79.37% graduation rate. Our year-to-date average for educational stability is 44.58%, surpassing the DCF goal of 25%. EHC provides and funds alternative accredited education for youths who request or need a different learning environment. Currently, we have sixteen youths enrolled in an online or in-person school. Two youths without placement attend day services and are being enrolled in the alternative education option.

We want to share the success story of a youth receiving case management services from our Crossover Team. The Crossover team serves youth adjudicated as a Juvenile Offender (JO) and Child in Need of Care (CINC). The youth, whom we will call NCD, has shown tremendous growth and determination in overcoming challenges and building a promising future for himself. NCD successfully completed his probation in October and has remained

out of trouble, demonstrating his commitment to making positive choices. In December 2024, he transitioned into an independent living placement, taking a crucial step toward self-sufficiency. Academically, NCD has excelled beyond expectations. He is set to graduate from Heights High School an entire year early this fall, completing his education as a Junior. His hard work and dedication have also paid off athletically, as he recently accepted a swimming scholarship to Sterling College. This fall, NCD will begin his college journey at Sterling College, where he plans to major in education and become a teacher. NCD's achievements are a testament to his resiliency and determination. He has taken full advantage of the opportunities presented to him, and we are confident that he will continue to thrive in the next chapter of his life.

With DCF Behavioral Health Intervention Team funding, we have created the Hope Unified for Belonging (HUB) team. This team uses a trauma-informed, youth-centered approach and is accessible 24/7. Each youth is assigned to a HUB Specialist, who is not case-carrying and focuses on understanding the unique needs of youth with placement instability and significant behavioral challenges. The goal is to help youth feel empowered in appropriate placement, education, and mental health choices. The team aims to access services to stabilize youth and achieve long-term placement. Placement stability is also a performance measurement.

We have several recommendations for the Joint Committee's consideration.

- We recommend that high quality prevention care continue to be pursued. We need to fund more mental health resources, substance abuse treatment centers, education, and behavioral health services proportionally across Kansas.
- We recommend an updated Statewide Capacity Building Study to better meet the needs of children in care. We continue to struggle with no statewide placement options, for many of our most vulnerable youth.
- We recommend increasing community-based care to ensure youth are placed in their local community, with access to services and support. Sedgwick County continues to have the most licensed capacity; however, we are still experiencing the most instances of FTP and the greatest number of youths in overnight placement. There are many youths placed in Sedgwick County from other catchment areas.
- EHC supports the request for funding from EmberHope Youthville for a Secure Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility to address the safety and behavioral health needs of our highest acuity youth in our state.
- We recommend addressing the need for more licensed social workers and mental health professionals in child welfare practice. Not only is there a workforce

shortage, but there is also a decline in quality casework practice. We encourage growth and partnership with state-funded schools of social work.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this written testimony. We believe we have ensured a successful transition for the children and families in Sedgwick County. I'm happy to stand for questions at the appropriate time.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B. Watkins". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Brenda Watkins, President of EmberHope Connections