

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Sarahi Aguilera, and I am proud to be a graduate student at Fort Hays State University. Throughout my six years of higher education, I have worked diligently to fund my academic journey and cover all my school expenses. Unfortunately, my legal status has complicated this pursuit, as I have found it incredibly challenging to access financial aid, student loans, or even qualify for several scholarship opportunities. This reality has often left me feeling discouraged and wondering how to continue my education without the support that many of my peers can easily obtain.

One piece of legislation that deeply concerns me is Senate Bill 254, which prohibits individuals who are unlawfully present in the United States from receiving any state or local public benefits in accordance with federal law. This bill poses significant barriers for countless undocumented students, like myself, who are striving to further their education and contribute positively to our communities. It is disheartening to think that such policies can undermine the potential of dedicated individuals who are eager to learn and give back.

In my graduate program, I have been fortunate enough to work as an intern therapist for the past two years, offering bilingual mental health services to the community. This role as a mental health advocate has afforded me the opportunity to connect with individuals from diverse backgrounds, empowering them with the tools to overcome some of life's most challenging experiences. I have also participated in court-ordered programs such as Anger Management and Alcohol Drug Information School (ADIS). These experiences have not only enriched my education but have allowed me to make meaningful contributions to the lives of those around me. Through these efforts, I have seen firsthand the positive impact that support and understanding can have on individuals navigating their own struggles. I have been able to pursue these valuable experiences partly because of the in-state tuition benefits that have made my education more accessible.

Despite the unwavering encouragement from my family and peers, the financial burden of pursuing my education independently has been significant. My experiences highlight the urgent need for policies that extend educational opportunities to all students, regardless of their legal

status. It is essential that we create pathways that allow individuals to thrive academically without the additional hurdles imposed by restrictive legislation.

With this testimony, I earnestly implore all elected committee members to vote NO on Senate Bill 254. By doing so, you will help safeguard the educational and career prospects of countless committed individuals within our community, including future educators, healthcare professionals, and others who play vital roles in our state of Kansas. Let us embed inclusivity and empowerment within our educational system, granting everyone the opportunity to flourish and contribute meaningfully to society. I urge you to reconsider the profound implications that this bill would have, not only for the undocumented community but for all those we serve and support, despite the barriers we face due to our status in this country. Our shared goal should be to foster a society where everyone has the chance to succeed and make a difference.

Thank you,

*Sarahi Aguilera*