

Diosselyn Tot

private citizen

2/26/2025

SB254

Written and Oral if possible

February 27, 2025

Senate Federal and State Affairs Committee

Opposition to SB 254

Chairman Senator Thompson and Members of the Senate Federal and State Affairs Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of in-state tuition for Kansas high school graduates, regardless of their immigration status. I strongly oppose Senate Bill 254 because I know firsthand the life-changing impact that in-state tuition has on undocumented students—young people who are determined to succeed, work hard, and give back to Kansas, the place we call home.

I was born in Guatemala, but Kansas City, Kansas, has been my home since I was six years old. I grew up here, attended Sumner Academy, and, like my classmates, dreamed of going to college. But as an undocumented student, my future was filled with uncertainty. Despite excelling academically and giving back to my community through volunteering since the age of 12, I faced overwhelming barriers to higher education. Without access to federal financial aid, paying out-of-state tuition would have made college impossible.

At the time, I held a U-Visa, which provided me with temporary legal status. But I had to fight for every opportunity—even just to have colleges review my application. I fought to keep my full-ride Kauffman Scholarship, knowing that without it, my dream of attending college would slip away.

Education is already an uphill battle for many Latina women. Nationally, only 2% of Latinas hold a graduate or professional degree, and fewer than 5% complete a bachelor's degree by age 29. For undocumented students, those numbers are even lower. Removing in-state tuition would only widen this gap and shut the door on talented, hardworking students who want to contribute to Kansas.

The opportunity to pay in-state tuition at the University of Kansas changed my life. It didn't erase the challenges—I still worked multiple jobs, balanced long hours, and navigated the stress of an

uncertain legal status—but it gave me a fighting chance. In 2017, I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Applied Behavioral Science with a focus on Community Health & Development. After graduation, I continued my professional journey, securing my first managerial role, and later, my first regional position. At age 27, I became a U.S. citizen—something that would have been nearly impossible without access to affordable, in-state tuition.

I am living proof of what is possible when young people are given the opportunity to succeed. Every organization I have worked with has been committed to giving back to the community:

- At Community Housing of Wyandotte County, I worked on revitalization projects that transformed vacant lots into community spaces through art, green spaces, and small business support.
- At El Centro, Inc., I worked to empower underserved communities by expanding access to vital resources. I helped lead civic engagement initiatives, facilitated educational workshops, and supported programs that provided critical assistance to community member and immigrant families. Through community outreach, I worked to ensure individuals had the tools and information needed to navigate their rights, access services, and actively participate in their communities.
- By 2020, I joined NeighborWorks America, where I began as a Relationship Manager serving the Midwest Region. Now, serve as a Senior Manager for Community Building & Engagement, I work nationally to support organizations that strengthen communities, develop local leadership, and advocate for housing and economic equity. I help design national conferences, oversee national award programs, and collaborate with partners across the country to create opportunities for communities to thrive.

Beyond my professional work, I remain deeply involved in my hometown, serving on boards that uplift community voices, promote the arts, expand voter participation, and advance community-driven solutions.

None of this would have been possible without in-state tuition. Senate Bill 254 does not help Kansans. It does not save taxpayer money, and it does not change anyone's legal status. It simply makes it harder for young people—who have grown up here, who love this state, and who want to contribute—to access an education. If SB 254 had been law when I was in school, I might not be here before you today as a college graduate, a professional, and a U.S. citizen giving back to the state that raised me.

Kansas needs educated, hardworking individuals to keep our communities and economy strong. I urge you to reject SB 254 and allow other students the same chance I had—to work hard, persevere, and contribute to Kansas' future.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.

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