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Written testimony opposed to SB 161
Senate Committee on Government Efficiency

Chair Erickson, Ranking Member Holscher, and Members of the Senate Committee on Government Efficiency,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. I am here in opposition to SB 161, which would require legislative approval prior to any agency seeking or implementing any public assistance program waiver or authorization from the federal government with the result of expanded eligibility or increased cost to the state.

My name is Haley Kottler, I am a campaign director at Kansas Appleseed Center for Law and Justice. Kansas Appleseed is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to the belief that Kansans, working together, can build a state full of thriving, inclusive, and just communities.

Kansas Appleseed has a long history of advocating for policy changes and solutions to eliminate the root causes of hunger to ensure equitable access to food for all Kansans. Simply put, hunger is a symptom of poverty. Public assistance programs are proven remedies to combat those symptoms and promote economic security and self-sufficiency. Barriers to public assistance programs like SNAP, WIC, medicaid, child care subsidies, TANF, and more only ensure continued poverty for thousands of hardworking Kansas families. As such, this bill is not a promise of government efficiency. Rather, it is a promise of continued hurdles and humiliation for Kansas families who are trying to make ends meet in increasingly uncertain economic conditions.

We are here today in the House Committee on Government Efficiency. Yet, this bill will not promote efficiency. In fact, this is a clear example of government overreach which will only create more inefficiencies and barriers in the very body of government we are standing in. This half-a-page bill seems simple enough on the surface. However, the list of programs this would apply to is extensive—programs that thousands of Kansans depend on everyday. This is everything from food assistance to child care subsidies. In a time when other committees are discussing how to keep such necessities like food, medical care, and the cost of child care affordable in the midst of increasing costs, this bill would ensure another administrative barrier dependent on quorums and legislative calendars slowed down needed relief to the most vulnerable Kansans.

This bill appears to be based on a harmful stereotype that our neighbors using public assistance programs are somehow undeserving and/or taking advantage of state-funded programs rather than any true effort to improve Kansas government efficiency. This unruly bill ignores the reality facing hundreds of thousands of Kansans everyday.

For example, Kansans are working hard, but still struggling. Twelve percent of households live below the federal poverty level. However, another 27% of households do not earn enough to afford their basic needs such as housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and taxes. These are Kansans with jobs. They are employed as truckers, retail workers, customer service representatives, nurses,

cooks, personal care aides, and more.¹ That means 447,000 Kansan households who work hard every day are struggling to make ends meet and are making difficult decisions about how to provide for their family's needs.² Of those 447,000 struggling households, only about 20% are receiving food assistance.³

Further, poverty exists outside of federal guidelines for these Kansas families. For example, in Kansas, a family of three must make less than \$33,576 per year in order to qualify for SNAP.⁴ Yet, according to cost of living research, a family of four (two working parents and two children) needs a combined income of over \$98,000 (before taxes) to live comfortably in Kansas.⁵ That leaves a significant gap in resources and assistance even for those families who are receiving assistance.

Navigating SNAP benefits, balancing food budgets, and just trying to get by until the next paycheck is the reality of the close to 200,000 Kansans who use SNAP to supplement their food budgets.⁶ On average, each household on SNAP in Kansas receives just \$171 a month to assist them with grocery purchases.⁷ Meanwhile, the average cost of groceries a month for a family of four is close to \$1,000.⁸ This bill further restricts SNAP and other public assistance programs for these hardworking Kansans based solely on false, insulting, outdated, and harmful stereotypes about people struggling to make ends meet.

Food assistance is just one crucial public assistance program this bill would stymie. Rather than allow for easier access to the program, it would tie the relief to those in need to the whims of partisan legislators. Such restrictions and delays in getting relief to those who might need, but are currently not qualified, has real and far-reaching consequences on the lives of Kansans. We have seen it before and will continue to see it should this bill pass.

For example, in a series of bills in 2015 and 2015 informally known as the HOPE Act, requirements that reduced the number of people with access to SNAP and increased barriers made it more difficult for the poorest families in the state to get assistance they needed:

- More than 30,000 Kansas were suddenly dropped from SNAP due to work requirements codified under the HOPE Act. These were Kansans who had income below the poverty line, many living in severe poverty. Those that remained on SNAP had better characteristics, but not because of the work requirements. Rather, they were simply better off to begin with, yet they were the only ones still eligible to have SNAP assistance. Meanwhile, Kansans who needed help the most were left behind.⁹
- At the same time the HOPE Act introduced more work requirements to SNAP, it also introduced restrictive rules related to child care assistance. The result was fewer Kansans using child care assistance.¹⁰ Research shows that families with child care assistance are more likely to have stable employment.¹¹ Yet, by making it harder for families to use child care assistance, the

¹ United Way. ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed Kansas Report. 2023.

<https://www.unitedforalice.org/household-budgets/kansas>

² This is the number of households below the federal poverty level and the number of struggling households combined based on the information found at: United Way. ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed Kansas Report. 2023.

<https://www.unitedforalice.org/household-budgets/kansas>

³ DCF. Public Assistance Report. 2023. https://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/ees/Documents/CURRENT_PAR_SF2023.pdf

⁴ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. "A Quick Guide to SNAP Eligibility and Benefits." 2024.

<https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/a-quick-guide-to-snap-eligibility-and-benefits>

⁵ Living Wage Calculator, "Living wage calculation for Kansas." 2024. <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/20>

⁶ DCF. Public Assistance Report. 2023. https://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/ees/Documents/CURRENT_PAR_SF2023.pdf

⁷ Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. 2023. https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_kansas.pdf

⁸ USDA. Food and Nutrition Service. "Official USDA Thrifty Food Plan: U.S. Average." 2023.

https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/Cost_Of_Food_Thrifty_Food_Plan_December_2023.pdf

⁹ Rosenbaum, D. and Bolen, E. "SNAP Reports Present Misleading Finding on Impact of Three-Month Time Limit." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. 2016.

<https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-reports-present-misleading-findings-on-impact-of-three-month-time>

¹⁰ DCF. Public Assistance Report. 2023. https://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/ees/Documents/CURRENT_PAR_SF2023.pdf

¹¹ Davis, E. E., Grobe, D. and Weber, R. B. "Rural-Urban Differences In Child Care Subsidy Use And Employment Stability." *Applied Economics Perspectives and Policies* 32, no. 1 (2010): 135-153.

HOPE Act took away a key support SNAP participants need to find employment—a safe, affordable place for their children to go while they work.

Barriers and reduced access have harmful effects beyond economics too. The HOPE Act has led to traumatized children and families. Families struggling to make ends meet have faced significant stress, leaving them hopeless with nowhere to turn. The result has been an increase on the number of abuse and neglect cases on an already imperfect foster care system in the state:

- Decades of research shows that household economic conditions are strongly correlated to child welfare services involvement, with poor children being overrepresented in the child welfare system.
- Researchers have found that as the HOPE Act created new barriers for struggling Kansans to receive assistance, the number of child abuse and neglect cases in the state went up.¹²

We have seen similarly harmful results of restricting access and spending on public assistance programs in other programs too. In 2024, a legislative audit of the TANF program found that spending on the program for the neediest families in the state had decreased by nearly 40% at the same time this legislature limited eligibility in the face of ever rising inflation. That report found that the state's eligibility requirements and benefit amounts have not been changed since 1997, leading to a 50% decrease in the spending power of the assistance families receive through the TANF program today compared to 1997.¹³ This bill would create similar stagnation in program access and benefits through the legislative approval process across countless other public assistance programs families depend on everyday as they try to build a better future for themselves and their children.

While this bill would create barriers to public assistance, keeping hundreds of thousands of Kansans in poverty, we know that public assistance programs are some of the most effective tools to help people out of poverty. For example, research has shown that SNAP reduces hunger by as much as 30%. It is also associated with improved educational outcomes, economic security, and health outcomes for families with low incomes who are able to access it. SNAP also essentially subsidizes low wages for recipients¹⁴. Research finds SNAP is important support for workers who have low or inconsistent wages. It is critical that we allow a pathway for SNAP and other assistance programs to reach Kansans in need.

It is time we focus on policy solutions that would actually improve the health of Kansans, rather than create unnecessary barriers with ineffective results. Bills like this one undercut the health of Kansans and ignore their needs in favor of unfounded assumptions about Kansans who are making hard decisions everyday to try to do their best for their families. How many more hardworking Kansans must we continually leave behind. I ask you, if you were in their position would you not seek assistance for your family?

There is much to be done to ensure Kansans can live healthy and fulfilled lives. Too many hard-working Kansans are still struggling to put food on their tables, gas in their cars, and a roof over their heads. We should be addressing these real struggles and strengthening public assistance to improve opportunity and outcomes for Kansans. I urge you to vote against SB161, and consider policies that help all Kansans to thrive.

Thank you for your time and consideration, I look forward to continuing work with this committee to ensure all Kansans have the opportunities to succeed.

Haley Kottler

¹² Ginther, D. K., Johnson-Motoyama, M. "Associations Between State TANF Policies, Child Protective Services Involvement, and Foster Care Placement." *Health Affairs*. 2022. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/epdf/10.1377/hlthaff.2022.00743>

¹³ Kansas Legislative Division of Post Audit. "Reviewing the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program." 2024. <https://www.kslpa.gov/audit-report-library/reviewing-the-temporary-assistance-for-needy-families-program/>

¹⁴ Cox, T. J. "SNAP Is and Remains Our Most Effective Tool to Combat Hunger." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. 2023. <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/snap-is-and-remains-our-most-effective-tool-to-combat-hunger>

