



O'Connell Children's Shelter Budget Request
Senate Committee on Ways and Means

Chairman Billinger, Vice Chair Claeys, and Ranking Minority Member Pettey, and Members of the Committee, my name is Gina Meier-Hummel, Executive Director of O'Connell Children's Shelter.

I am in my 33rd year of serving at-risk Kansas families. I have spent my career working both in public child welfare and in nonprofit management.

O'Connell Children's Shelter is nearing its 50th year of service to Kansas children and families. Mrs. O'Connell donated the 120 acres upon which the ranch sits today in Southeast Lawrence. Insightfully nearly five decades ago, Mrs. O'Connell was worried about young men ending up in jail and created O'Connell Youth Ranch (OYR) in the hopes that young people who needed assistance would have a safe place to grow. She had great foresight to see the importance of structure, consistency, and accountability in a safe, home-like environment when it comes to effectively intervening with youth.

Several years later, leaders in the Lawrence community recognized that OYR alone could not address all the needs of at-risk youth and The Children's Shelter was created. The primary focus of The Children's Shelter (TCS) was originally providing emergency placement services for youth when law enforcement had to intervene in a child's life, and we have been doing this work now for nearly 45 years. In 2021, OYR and TCS merged to become O'Connell Children's Shelter (OCS).

Today, OCS CARF-accredited, offering QRTP, Emergency Placement, Respite Placement, and Child Placing Agency services, and support to foster families and kin. Our five homes (three on the ranch property and two in the city) have the capacity to provide care for nearly 60 youth at any one time.

Today, O'Connell Children's Shelter offers a multitude of services to children, youth and families not only in hopes of providing options if residential care is needed but services and supports to strengthen families so that system involvement—either as a Child in Need of Care (CINC) or as a Juvenile Offender (JO)—is not necessary. We offer all services for free to qualifying families, including case management, in-

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home services and Functional Family Therapy, thanks to generous support from our partners at KDOC, DCF, and our County Commissioners/Leaders.

But we always need more help which brings me to why I am here. I understand there are questions and concerns about residential care and congregate care, but I am here to tell you we are frequently the lynchpin necessary to halt youth churning through placements in the foster care system. This role is a pivotal, often too criticized and underfunded, part of the system. OCS prides itself on being a stabilizing force when other parts of the system have failed our youth, e.g., when the youth have upwards of 50 or 60 placements. When they are behind in school or kicked out of school, we help them finish school, get their GED or get a job. We help make sure if they are aging out that they are not aging out to homelessness.

- 1) We need workforce investment. We need more money in our system, our rates need to be increased. We cannot wait for a rate study to see how much it costs to provide this care; we need this money now. To increase staff retention and help with recruitment for vital residential staffing needs, we would need an additional \$22.83 per child if we were serving an average of 30 youth a day every day of the year. That does not account for other expenses, the cost of which are rising every day. Additionally, we need to be able to provide quality training for our staff now as they grapple with the higher acuity youth placed in residential care. We would ask for a \$400,000 investment in building our workforce—this would allow us to provide additional training, combat the rising costs of providing care, and increase staff wages to aid in hiring and retention.

Our staff are the ones providing care for juvenile offenders caught up in the foster care system. Staff have been hit, kicked, and spit on; their lives have been threatened. We have witnessed and had to intervene when youth have tried to harm other youth or when youth have tried to harm themselves. This is not a workforce that is expendable, because the youth we serve are not expendable. They deserve training specifically geared toward handling these higher acuity youth.

- 2) I also want you to know we would welcome the opportunity to do co-responding work with our law enforcement officers. We have done this work before and do some of it now and absolutely believe it is the right thing to do to preserve more families, especially after hours. We would need \$150,000 to

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add two social workers to our staff to work alongside law enforcement during non-business hours.

- 3) We would love the support of the legislature in funding the new crisis beds we are creating in our Lawrence Family Service Center. These are beds where youth can get necessary one-on-one care when other options are not proving to be successful for them. This would target specifically the population of hard-to-place youth. We are working on an entire crisis continuum with Bert Nash in Lawrence, but these beds are a separate part of this system and have yet to be funded and we would love this to be a priority of the legislators. We would ask for \$450,000 to help fund the creation of these beds.

I am happy to speak with any of you at any time about any of this and thank you for your work on behalf of Kansans.

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