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Kansas Action for Children
Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 95
Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee

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Shaping policy that puts children first

Chair Schmidt and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of the Strategic Opportunities to Achieve Results (SOAR) Act. Kansas Action for Children’s vision is to make Kansas the best state to raise a child, and our organization shapes health, education, and economic policies that benefit Kansas children and their families. **Safety net programs like cash assistance, food assistance, and child care assistance help families provide the very basics when jobs don’t pay enough to make ends meet. The SOAR Act will help Kansas safety net programs more effectively reach children in need.** I will focus on two provisions of the legislation:

Lengthening the work exemption for single parents of newborns protects the health and well-being of Kansas infants. The first year of a child’s life is a critical window of brain development, which can lay a foundation for future success. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance program protects infants from some of the intense stress associated with severe economic hardship. This modest monthly sum of money – a family of three can receive, at maximum, \$429 per month – can help a struggling family make ends meet. If a family has no money on hand, they may be forced to go without necessities – perhaps skipping meals or reusing dirty diapers. This kind of extreme scarcity jeopardizes a child’s chance of success later in life. The SOAR Act will create some flexibility for new parents, so that cash assistance can be more effective during this critical window of opportunity for very poor Kansas infants.

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Exempting parents attending school or work training from inflexible hourly work requirements for child care assistance and removing the 24-month lifetime limit for child care assistance eligibility while parents are attending school will help the child care assistance program better serve working families. This program pays off for the whole family. Quality child care is an early learning opportunity that prepares young children to succeed in school and in life. Available and affordable child care means that parents can go to work, search for work, or attend school to improve their families’ economic circumstances. Parents in low-wage jobs may struggle with unpredictable work schedules, and inflexible work requirements might prevent parents from using child care assistance while they search for jobs. Lifetime limits on using child care while attending school can prevent parents from accessing education and training opportunities that can result in higher-paid jobs. The SOAR Act will address these shortcomings so that the child care assistance program can better aid working Kansas families.

Senate Public Health and Welfare

Date 2.7.17

Attachment 9

The Kansas safety net could do a better job reaching Kansas children in need. In 2007 – prior to the start of the Great Recession – 100,000 Kansas children lived in families with incomes below the federal poverty level. Today need has grown, and 122,000 Kansas children live in poverty. **However, safety net programs are reaching far fewer poor Kansas children.** The TANF cash assistance program reached an average of 26,633 children each month in 2007, but served just 8,621 in December 2016. The child care assistance program reached 21,025 children in 2007, but served just 10,575 in December 2016. **If these programs work effectively they can create a safety net, catching children at risk of falling into financial disaster so that they have the necessities they need to succeed in life.** The SOAR Act is a good opportunity for policymakers to strengthen Kansas by eliminating some of the unnecessary administrative requirements, barriers, and red tape that poke holes in the state safety net and prevent it from serving families in need. We encourage Kansas policymakers to take these steps to build a Kansas where no child goes to bed hungry or without a roof over their head, and where every single Kansas child can be hopeful about their future.