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Center for Law and Social Policy
Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 95
Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee

Chair Schmidt and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), I am pleased to present this testimony in support of the “SOAR” (Strategic Opportunities to Achieve Results) Act. CLASP is a national, nonpartisan, anti-poverty nonprofit advancing policy solutions for low-income people. Working at the federal, state, and local levels, we develop practical yet visionary strategies for reducing poverty and promoting economic security.

The SOAR Act would make an investment in the long-term economic well-being of low-income Kansas children by enabling their parents to attend school and by protecting infants from being pushed deeper into poverty due to policies that fail to recognize the harsh realities of today’s low-wage labor markets. Americans overwhelmingly agree that children’s fate in life should not be determined by the circumstances in which they are born. But children born into poor families are at great risk of persistent poverty during their childhood.

A growing body of evidence shows that poverty in early childhood is a grave threat to children’s long-term health, well-being, and educational success, with persistent and deep poverty causing the most damage. Even modest supports can make a major difference -- studies have found that, holding all else equal, for families with young children (prenatal to age 5) and incomes below \$25,000, a \$3,000 annual boost to family income during the early childhood period is associated with a 17 percent increase in adult earnings when the children grow up, as well as in additional hours of work.

Specifically, the SOAR Act exempts student-parents from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) work requirements and the 24-month lifetime limit for child care assistance while parents attend school. By engaging in education and training, parents are more likely to be able to obtain jobs that are both higher paying and more stable over time. More than a quarter of TANF adult recipients in Kansas are aged 24 or younger, and education and training that will lead to a lifetime of higher earnings is a sound investment.

The realities of today’s labor market are that a postsecondary credential is increasingly required for all but the lowest-paying jobs. A recent synthesis of the literature on what works in employment and training is unequivocal: “A postsecondary education, particularly a degree or industry-recognized credential related to jobs in demand, is the most important determinant of differences in workers’ lifetime earnings and incomes.” The median earnings for a worker with less than a high school diploma is \$19,954 and for a worker with a high school diploma is

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\$27,868, compared to earnings of \$33,988 for workers with some college credits or an associate's degree, and \$50,515 for workers with a bachelor's degree. Adults with less education also fare worse when finding employment.

The SOAR Act would also exempt single mothers of infants from mandatory TANF work requirements until babies are 12 months old. The federal law allows such parents to be excluded from the work participation rate, so Kansas can do this without risk of federal penalty. It is important to realize that many of these parents will still choose to work, even if they are not required to participate. However, without a mandate, parents of infants will have the option to work part-time, or wait for a job with a schedule that matches the availability of high-quality child care, without risk of sanctions that will leave them in crushing poverty.

Inflexible TANF work requirements make little accommodation for the reality that the low-wage hourly jobs typically available to TANF recipients and other young parents are characterized by unpredictable and unstable schedules, meaning that workers frequently do not know the days or hours they are scheduled to work until a few days in advance and may experience significant fluctuations in number of hours and timing of shifts from week to week. Exempting parents of infants from these rigid rules is a common-sense solution that allows parents to fulfill their dual roles as wage-earners and caregivers.

A large and growing body of research has shown that early childhood is a particularly critical period for children's development, with implications for lifelong physical and emotional well-being. The earliest years of life are a period of incredible growth. To properly shape their brains and build a healthy foundation for life, children need a number of important inputs including consistent relationships with caring adults and adequate health and developmental supports. The SOAR Act is an important step towards insuring that TANF and child care subsidies support positive child development.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions regarding this testimony or other issues regarding TANF, I would be happy to be of assistance. I can be reached at elowerbasch@clasp.org.