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**Testimony by Rabbi Moti Rieber in support of SB 95,
amendments to public assistance requirements and benefits**

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee —

I am the Executive Director of Kansas Interfaith Action, a statewide, multi-faith issue-advocacy organization that “puts faith into action” by educating, engaging and advocating on behalf of people of faith and the public regarding critical social and economic justice issues. I am writing in support of the SB 95, the SOAR Act, because we believe it addresses some of the problems that arose with previous legislation.

A strong safety net, including TANF and SNAP, is important element of support for poorer Kansans. Recent Kansas policy is based on the assumption that getting needy families off of public assistance is itself proof that these families have lifted themselves out of poverty by work, but this claim isn't supported by the available data. As the statute stands now, people can be, and are, forced off of TANF rolls for low-paying service jobs, without a living wage, benefits, or chance of advancement. Such employment can even jeopardize their eligibility for KanCare.

KIFA believes that when people leave TANF it should be for work with a future, and that they should continue to be eligible for job training, child care assistance, and the ability to further their education without time limit, and without endangering their eligibility for safety net protections.

In our opinion, SB 95 would bring the statute closer to its stated goal – poverty alleviation – a goal all of us share.

I'm sure I don't need to remind the committee the many and frequent Scriptural directives to care for the poor. Central to our religious traditions, sacred texts, and teachings is a divine mandate to side with and protect the poor. Thus the Bible says:

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs.

If one refuses to help the needy, the scripture continues:

He may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin . . . Give generously to him [the poor] and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (Deuteronomy 15:7-11, NIV).

Senate Public Health and Welfare

Date 2.7.17

Attachment 23-1

I refer you also to the United Methodist Church's "Principles of Welfare Reform," found in the Book of Resolutions. Some of the principles include:

- having poverty reduction as a central goal;
- adequate state and federal funding for welfare;
- providing training and education necessary for unskilled workers to get and hold jobs;
- making sure that former welfare recipients receive at least as much from working as they received from welfare;
- not imposing time limits on people who are complying with the rules of the program; and
- making sure the state provides access to counseling, legal assistance, and information on eligibility for child support, job training and placement, medical care, affordable housing, food programs, and education.

Similar statements of principle, covering many of the same points, have been produced by the Jewish Council of Public Affairs and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, among others. These are the people whose job it is to translate religious values and teachings into public policy, and KIFA relies heavily on their work.

In other words, our faith leaders encourage both state and federal governments to take not a punitive approach, but, to quote the United Methodist Church, "to protect the right of all people to dignity and well-being, to improve education and training opportunities, and to ensure a safety net for the most vulnerable among us."

The SOAR Act, the current legislation, would address some of the problems with the current statute in the following ways:

- It lengthens the time a single, custodial parent may stay home from work to care for a newborn infant to one year, from the current three months;
- The successful completion of education being the best predictor and enabler of one's long-term earning capacity, this act eases the time limitations and work requirements for parents who are enrolled in educational programs, and
- It permits waivers for the time-limitations on food assistance ("food stamps") to single adults in times of high unemployment, when jobs are not easy to come by.

A strengthened social safety net is key to protecting people from, and lifting them out of, poverty. The SOAR Act, SB 95, would address some real issues in the current statute. Kansas Interfaith Action urges this committee to pass it favorably on to the full House for consideration.

Thank you for your attention, and I am available at the contact information above if you have any questions.