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Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare

Testimony from Christie Appelhanz, executive director of the Children's Alliance of Kansas

Chairman Suellenthrop and Members of the Committee,

When we talk about the reasons to expand Medicaid (KanCare) in Kansas, most supporters mention boosting insurance rates or economic incentives. Those are valid, worthy reasons to expand KanCare eligibility. But when people ask me why I advocate for it, I think about Kansas children in or at risk of entering foster care.

Children in state custody, as you may know, are already covered by KanCare. That's a good thing because they face greater health needs because of their exposure to trauma caused by abuse, neglect and parental substance use disorders. But, because Kansas hasn't expanded KanCare, mom and dad often must go without routine preventive health care. It's heartbreaking – and it is threatening stability for our children who are already uniquely vulnerable.

Access to mental health and substance use disorder treatment through KanCare could alleviate factors that lead to children being placed in foster care. Sadly, thousands of parents in Kansas fall into what's called the "coverage gap." They earn too much to qualify for KanCare, but their incomes are too low to purchase private insurance. The majority work in jobs that don't offer health insurance. Without access to affordable health care, they are just one serious illness or injury away from a medical bill that could lead to financial disaster.

And it's not just parents. With a record number of Kansas children in foster care, caregivers of all types are at risk. Many foster parents or kinship families are caring for children with special needs while not being able to see a doctor themselves. We know children fare best when they are raised in families equipped to meet their needs. At a time when we need more foster parents than ever, having health insurance might make more people inclined to take on the responsibility of fostering.

Studies align with this thinking. According to a new report in JAMA Network Open, the number of child neglect cases fell in states that expanded their Medicaid programs.

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Unsurprisingly, researchers specifically cited increased access to mental health care as one of the key factors to reducing abuse and neglect.

When kids come into foster care, we have already failed them by not investing in the resiliency of their families. Child maltreatment happens when good people in struggling families are stretched to the breaking point. There are so many challenges facing the child welfare system in Kansas, and sometimes there are no easy answers. But there's something we can do right now—we can join 36 other states in expanding Medicaid and start making real progress on prevention of child abuse and neglect.