



SOUTHWEST GUIDANCE CENTER, INC.

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Testimony to Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee

In Support of SB 407

Chairman Suellentrop and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 407. My name is Leslie Bissell, and I am the Executive Director of Southwest Guidance Center, the licensed Community Mental Health Center (CMHC) serving Haskell, Meade, Seward, and Stevens counties in southwest Kansas. As a CMHC, we are the local Mental Health Authority providing publicly funded community-based mental health services in our four-county catchment area.

On an annual basis, our Center serves approximately 600 individuals, including children and youth (204 in 2019). We provide community-based mental and behavioral health services 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, including crisis services. It is our mission to provide the right service, at the right time, in the right amount, in the least restrictive environment.

There are times, however, when the youth we serve require a higher level of care than can be safely provided in the community and we need to refer them to inpatient services (20 children/teens in 2019). With the closure of the children's psychiatric inpatient acute beds at KVC in Hays in 2019, the nearest inpatient beds for youth are now located in Wichita, an average of 205.5 miles from their home communities. This places additional strain on children and families who are already experiencing crisis.

Without access to local inpatient services, the residents of southwest Kansas are not only required to travel at least three hours one way to receive care, but they also must receive this care without the support of their loved ones. Because many families rely on both parents going to work outside the home, neither parent is often able to stay away from work the 3-5 days that an inpatient stay may require. As a result, the child is often left alone at a time when support from their family is needed most.

Like other Kansas communities, the suicide rate among our teens is increasing as well as the frequency of reported suicidal thoughts and attempts. The difference in our area however, is that due to the lack of local resources, parents often make the choice to try and support their child at home rather than seeking help from us or other providers. If we had access to inpatient resources locally, our ability to advocate for and facilitate more proactive treatment would also be more effective.

Serving Haskell, Meade, Seward and Stevens Counties

Another unique characteristic of the Center's catchment area is that we also have the highest number of Spanish speaking individuals in the state of Kansas. Based on last year's data, at least 80% of our students in USD480 are Hispanic. This unique cultural dynamic that is similar in both Ford and Finney counties, suggests that the need for bilingual services provided by culturally competent clinicians is essential. Unfortunately, when a child must be sent three hours away for treatment, these vital cultural needs are often overlooked and not integrated into the discharge plan.

The presence of a local inpatient psychiatric unit for children in southwest Kansas would help our community in many ways. Our families would not only have increased access to care, but we as their outpatient provider would be better able to coordinate care before, during, and after an acute psychiatric crisis. We have a greater understanding of our local resources and how best to use them. We are also better equipped to advocate for the best quality treatment across the full continuum of care when we have access to the consumer we are serving. The necessity for the Department of Children and Families or law enforcement to assist with transport to facilities across the state would be reduced, and our efforts to impact the mental health of our community could be done so more strategically.

One of the reasons I choose to live in Liberal, Kansas is because I value the power of community. We pull together in times of difficulty to help our neighbor and ensure that each member has what they need to live the best life they can. We also go above and beyond to identify creative methods to address a wide variety of concerns. By having an inpatient psychiatric unit within an hour's drive would strengthen our ability to thrive in the place that we choose to call home.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important issue.



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