



Testimony in Support of HB2345
House Federal & State Affairs Committee
Wednesday, February 17, 2021

FosterAdopt Connect is pleased to submit testimony in support of HB2345. *FosterAdopt Connect* is a licensed Child Placing Agency in Kansas. Our agency offers many program services to Kansas children, youth, and families as they navigate the complexities of the child welfare system. With the help of innovative tools, a dedicated professional staff, and over 20 years of experience working in the Kansas and Missouri foster care systems, we're equipped to connect children with families that provide love, healing, and stability for a brighter future.

Chairman Concannon and Members of the Committee, my name is Dan Murray, here today representing *FosterAdopt Connect*. I'm speaking today on behalf of our CEO, Lori Ross, the amazing staff at *FosterAdopt Connect*, and for the children and families most impacted by the day-to-day work of the child welfare system.

While this astute body, and the citizens of Kansas have focused strongly on child welfare over the past few years, the needs of children in the foster care system have unfortunately not been addressed in recent years. We strongly applaud the work that the legislature and DCF have done over the past couple of years to investigate and evaluate the effectiveness of our system of child protection, and to begin to put safeguards in place to prevent as many of the horrendous individual child tragedies of our recent past as we can.

We believe that this bill, HB 2345, establishing an Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), is a critical step in this effort. While the bill establishing the joint committee on child welfare oversight is also critically important, we recognize that the focus of that committee will be **on identifying and addressing systemic issues and barriers** as it rightly should be. An OCA offers the citizens of Kansas the opportunity to bring attention to the **problems within individual child welfare situations**, often before a terrible outcome can occur. An effective OCA can review situations with impartiality and offer suggestions to agencies, courts, and interested parties about next steps.

An Office of the Child Advocate is another collector of information which it can feed to the legislature about any concerning trends it finds through its review of individual case situations. In the same way, and OCA investigation can uncover problems within DCF or contracted agencies and bring those situations to the leadership so that issues can be addressed.

And finally, an effective OCA offers citizens who care about children at risk an opportunity to ask for special attention when they feel like traditional advocacy routes are failing them. The OCA can review

the handling of a case (not to second guess individual worker decisions or to interfere in judicial authority), but rather to determine if agencies have followed their own processes and to suggest steps back to the administration of those agencies if processes have not been followed.

We have operated as an agency in Missouri for 20 years and were aware of the establishment of the Missouri Office of the Child Advocate in 2002. This office has been an invaluable partner to Missouri's legislature and child welfare agencies since that time and is an entity which engages regularly with Missouri citizens in pursuit of a more effective child welfare system. While the proposal here is not exactly the same (as two states never function exactly the same way), the lessons learned from the experience of the Missouri Office of the Child advocate have been incorporated into this bill.

A child welfare system will never be able to offer perfect protection for children, or perfect service to families, but it should always strive to improve. Our best lessons come from the mistakes we make. When we acknowledge, review and evaluate our mistakes, we are able to learn from them. We strongly support this effort to provide all of the citizens of Kansas with another tool in its effort to do exactly that. Our children deserve the very best we can do.

We encourage your support of HB2345 as a critical next step in the Kansas Child Protection System.

Again, we strongly support HB2345 as it will allow solid protections for our most vulnerable youth. We urge the committee to pass the bill out favorably."

Dan Murray on behalf of:

Lori Ross

Chief Executive Officer

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