

**Testimony to the Committee on Children and Seniors on HB 2345**  
**February 17, 2021**

Good morning Chairperson Concannon and members of the committee,

My name is Tara Wallace. I am a licensed clinical social worker in private practice as a child trauma therapist.

I will not bore you with data about the trauma experienced by children and families in the child welfare system. Nor will I paint the picture of a perfect system that experiences occasional issues which are blown out of proportion by the media. There is not enough room in our capitol to contain the existing data about the child welfare system's relationship to trauma. And frankly, there is no such thing as a perfect child welfare system.

I am a proponent of the Office of the Child Advocate for many reasons. But today I choose to give you one.

During my first Child Welfare System Task Force meeting in 2017, I listened to individuals in leadership from DCF and its subcontractors speak for hours about how well the child welfare system works. They included success stories about children being returned to their families, as well as those adopted and thriving in forever families.

What they did not talk about is the family repeatedly calling their office because they were unable to find out what worker was assigned to their child's case when the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children paperwork was sent from the State of Arizona almost 2 months prior. (*This kind of delay can result in a child being moved from foster care to adoption without a family's knowledge or consent.*) Nor did they talk about the family being given a new case plan tasks to complete each time their relative is supposed to be moved from a foster home into their home. (*This can delay permanency efforts for several years.*)

Finally, and probably the reason that hits home most for me as a social worker, they did not talk about the individual who went to school to become a helping professional because they believed they could make a difference. As you have probably heard, quite a few of these individuals, my well-intended colleagues burn out and leave the child welfare system for less stressful professions within just a few short years. While avoiding stories about how broken the child welfare system is, it is easy to overlook the individuals in the middle of the chaos who manage to keep children from falling victim to this machine that sucks in struggling families and spits out hollow shells of dysfunction and generational trauma.

We never hear their stories because they do not believe they have a voice. These individuals are often told to put the agency above all else, including their integrity and their license. A new helper fresh out of school desires nothing more than to learn the ropes by becoming part of a great team until those ropes begin to bind them to the opposite of what they learned to be good and true about child welfare. Textbook lessons about reporting violations are meaningless when the decision to simply question or even report conduct that is harmful to children and families is weighed against threats of retaliation or loss of employment.

The Office of the Child Advocate represents transparency and integrity to the families of Kansas. But it also provides stability and safety for helping professionals who desire to be committed to the child welfare system without sacrificing their livelihood. The cumulative impact? A willingness to work towards building a better future together. That is my second biggest “Why” in support of the Office of the Child Advocate.

Thank you for your time.