

# Connie Mayes MA LMSW

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IN SUPPORT OF HB 2345

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I am writing in support of HB 2345. I am a LMSW providing mental health services in my private practice primarily to clients, both adults and children, who are involved in the child welfare system. I retired from DCF in 2013 after twenty-one years in that agency, mostly working in foster care, and prior to that, I was employed in private agencies who served at risk or foster care youth. From 2017-2018, I was a member of the Child Welfare System Task Force Working Group: Protective Services and Family Preservation (a group which recommended creation of an Office of Child Advocate at the State level). In my personal life, I have been a foster parent, a kinship placement, and a Child In Need of Care Permanent Custodian. I believe all these experiences make me qualified to speak to this Bill.

Members of families involved in the various State systems in Kansas have gone too long without a primary point that can oversee their wellbeing. This includes birth, kin, foster, and adoptive families and children of all ages. Despite the best efforts of volunteer agencies who advocate for that wellbeing, there is no point of contact which has any power to ask questions and gain answers as to both systemic and individual issues. Therefore, attempts at improving child welfare services, mental health services, corrections services, etc., are done in “silos”, even by those agency heads who have the best of intentions. These fragmented systems cannot provide cohesive services.

In my daily life, it is common for me to hear complaints from those who are clients in those systems. It is equally usual for me to hear complaints from those who are working within those systems. Those complaints vary from job performance of individual professionals, lack of parent/child visits, and lack of referrals for necessary services to systems which do not work together and often seem to provide conflicting information. Granted, some of those complaints can and should be addressed at the local level. However, a good number should be received, analyzed, and addressed at the State level. Doing so would improve services and increase both family and child wellbeing.

Therefore, I ask that you support HB Bill 2345 and create an Office of Child Advocate, which would operate independently of State Administration, to improve family and child wellbeing in Kansas. Children and families of Kansas will thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

Connie J. Mayes, MA, LMSW