

Testimony of Natalie Zarate
Young Leader and Former Foster Youth

Kansas Appleseed

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House Committee

In support of House Bill 2345

February 15th, 2021

Members of the House Committee

My name is Natalie Zarate and I'm a young leader for Kansas Appleseed who aged out of foster care in 2015. Kansas Appleseed is advocating for House Bill 2345 which would establish an office of child advocacy. This office would be independent of DCF, and foster care agencies. I support this bill because I was neglected in foster care, and my health and education have suffered for it. Let me tell you part of my story. As a middle schooler, I was active in sports and dance and clubs. When I came home from school I was hungry! My foster Mom would feed me small granola bars. Then I would go without dinner. She did not feed me, or the three or four foster care kids in the house dinner. Around dinner time I would leave the house and walk to my biological Mom's home which was about 2 miles away. We ate dinner together, and then I'd walk back. The foster care Mom knew most nights I would eat with my Mom. She did not seem to care. This type of behavior on the part of a foster care parent should not happen. An office of child advocacy would be able to review complaints about these types of foster care homes. I entered the system when I was 11 years old and I aged out at 18. My foster care experience has overshadowed everything I have tried to accomplish, both while I was in foster care, and

even today. Most importantly, my health has been greatly impacted. I was on NO medication when I entered the system at age 11.. Almost immediately I was given sedative medications, including Ritalin, Seroquel, and Lexapro. At age 12 I was put in a “time out room” for refusing to take my medicine. The room had a metal door, was cold with no bed, no blankets, nothing. I remember being in that room for several days at a time isolated from my peers and the rest of the world. All because I refused to take medicine that literally made me hallucinate. One day when I was in my assigned room I was laying there looking around the room, I found myself laughing hysterically, thinking I was talking to my older sister and my grandmother. In reality, I was just talking to myself.

Not only was my health impacted, but my education suffered. You may understand only 58% of teens in foster care graduate High School their senior year. You may also know the average placement in foster care in the state of Kansas lasts 1000 days. This means foster care school children are changing schools three and four times a year. My education was drastically impacted because I moved around. Education has always been important to me, and I did my homework on time. Because of the lack of continuity in my education I had to figure out what I didn't know and catch up on my own when I was behind. I was lucky enough to teach myself and catch up. Friends I know in foster care were not able to figure that out and they didn't graduate. Additionally, my relationships and my ability to build relationships were also negatively impacted because I move often.

House Bill 2187 will help stabilize the home environments of children and teens in foster care, allowing them to stay in the same schools they start. This will give them consistency in their education and help them build relationships with teachers and fellow students.

The neglect and the impact on my health eventually caused me to become desperate. The first time I ran away was at age 12. Hundreds of youth in foster care in Kansas alone run away

every year. This needs to be recognized as an act of desperation. HB 2345 would create an opportunity for runaways to be heard. I ran several times, at one point hitch hiking 80 miles. I am lucky I didn't get picked by the wrong people.

These kids desperately need your help now.