



Testimony to House Health and Human Services on House Bill 2734

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Chair Landwehr and members of the Committee, my name is Michelle Ponce. I am the Associate Director for the Association of Community Mental Health Centers of Kansas, Inc. The Association represents the 26 licensed Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) in Kansas that provide behavioral health services in all 105 counties, 24-hours a day, seven days a week. In Kansas, CMHCs are the local Mental Health Authorities coordinating the delivery of publicly funded community-based mental health services. As part of licensing regulations, CMHCs are required to provide services to all Kansans needing them, regardless of their ability to pay. This makes the community mental health system the “safety net” for Kansans with behavioral health needs.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of HB 2734.

Kansas CMHCs have a combined staff of over 5,000 (although current estimates are that they are operating with approximately a 20% vacancy rate) providing mental health services in every county of the state in over 120 locations. Together they form an integral part of the mental health system in Kansas offering a network of access to a comprehensive array of community-based treatment for mental health and substance use disorders, as well as medical services across the state.

Ensuring an adequate workforce is an ongoing challenge. In recent years, our Kansas CMHCs have lost staff not only to private practice, as well as schools, hospitals, and other organizations, but also to border states who have additional resources to offer higher compensation due to expansion of Medicaid or implementation of the Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC) model. The CCBHC model is designed to reimburse providers for the true cost of services, therefor providing additional resources to more effectively recruit and retain staff. The 2021 Kansas Legislature passed Sen Sub HB 2208 that will implement CCBHCs in Kansas, and we are optimistic this will help Kansas CMHCs to become more competitive employers as they transition to CCBHCs.

However, we still need qualified professionals to fill those positions. A majority of Kansas counties qualify as health professional shortage areas, and multiple strategies are needed to increase the workforce. HB 2734 will lessen the burden on qualified clinical staff seeking licensure, thus encouraging them to choose to stay and work in Kansas and ensure they are able to enter the workforce more quickly.

In conclusion, we believe this bill that can help to expand and enhance our workforce and is a welcome addition to the BSRB statutory and regulatory processes.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today, and I will stand for questions at the appropriate time.