

Testimony on HB 2785
Rachel Willis, Director of Legislative Affairs
at the Kansas Department of Commerce
House Commerce
March 6th, 1:30 pm
Room 346-S

The Kansas Department of Commerce requests that the Kansas Legislature support HB 2785.

According to 2023 Kids Count Data Book, twenty-one counties in the state do not have any available childcare spots for infants. It is estimated that fifty million workers or about one third of the U.S. workforce has a child under fourteen in their household. Specifically in Kansas, seventy-two percent of young children reside in households in which all available parents participate in the workforce. In a recent survey conducted by the Harvard Business Review, twenty percent of working parents had to leave work or reduce their work hours solely due to a lack of childcare.

These data points only further support what Commerce hears regularly from businesses across the state: childcare is one of the biggest barriers for the workforce. Childcare is critical not only to providing families the option to enter or return to the workforce, but also contributes to family members maintaining their jobs and upward mobility. Research has shown that inadequate childcare negatively impacts family income, business profitability and productivity, state revenue and the economy. This systemic problem Kansas is facing has a direct, negative impact on our workforce, productivity and the economy overall.

HB 2785 creates the much-needed early childhood governance reform through consolidation and unification. The establishment of the Kansas Office of Early Childhood addresses key weaknesses in our current early childhood system in the state and will lay the foundation to the creation of a thriving early childhood system. The bipartisan Kansas Early Childhood Transition Task Force identified a variety of problems within the system as they gathered data and listened to providers and families. The bill directly addresses those issues specifically including:

- The difficulty of navigating the current early childhood system
- Overlapping requirement on providers
- Policy misalignment
- Funding streams not working well together
- Lack of clear lines of authority

This change sends a clear message to the early childhood providers, families and our workforce that the status quo is inadequate, and we are committed to improving it. While this structure is not new to many states (Missouri, North Dakota, Alabama and Georgia), it is just what Kansas needs to create efficiencies and accountability.

As we work to continue to improve our economy and make Kansas the best state to live, work and play, we believe this change will help establish a thriving early childhood system that families and employers need. I urge the committee to favorably pass HB 2785.