

Testimony to the Senate Education Committee
HB2669 (MHIT)
March 19, 2024
By Randy Callstrom

Chair Baumgardner and committee members,

Good afternoon. My name is Randy Callstrom, and I am the President and CEO of Wyandot Behavioral Health Network. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony as a proponent for HB2669.

We were one of the first community mental health centers who participated in the original MHIT pilot. In 2018, we served eleven (11) schools in the USD 500 Kansas City Kansas School District through the MHIT Program. Today, we serve fourteen (14) schools in KCK District and the Bonner Springs School District through the MHIT program.

Wyandot BHN has long enjoyed a strong working relationship with the KCK School District. However, through the MHT program we have formalized relationships and procedures, and our therapists and case managers work hand in hand with the school mental health liaisons to help students. The liaisons identify students who may need mental health services, and we work together to engage parents to allow their child to participate in services.

Prior to being accepted to participate in the MHIT program and working with Wyandot BHN, Bonner Springs Schools would call the police when a student made statements about suicide or threatened to harm themselves. Today, we respond in the school to assess the student's risk and work with the family to help the youth access the level of care they need.

Barriers to accessing mental health care, such as transportation, are mitigated by providing therapy and case management services in the school, and Wyandot BHN staff respond in real time to resolve crisis situations.

Through December 2023, 231 students in the KCK School District have participated in the MHIT program. Of those, 42% have improved their school attendance; 51% have improved their externalizing or acting out behaviors, 40% have shown academic improvement; and 43% have improved their internalizing behaviors such as feelings of depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide.

The MHIT program is making a difference in the lives of students.

I worked with schools in Wyandotte County for many years before the MHIT program was launched and we accomplished many positive things together. But I also remember when funding cuts led to half of the social work staff being laid off, and I saw the impact that had on students. Funding from the legislature helps assure that mental health liaisons and school based mental health staff will be there year after year, and the funding helps underwrite services for students without a pay source further breaking down barriers to accessing mental health treatment.

According to the CDC, youth suicide rates have increased by 60% since 2011. COVID had a significant impact on the emotional well being of children who now struggle with social skills, poor academics, and experience increased anxiety and acting out behaviors. The need for children and adolescents to access mental health treatment has never been greater. And the need for sustainable funding for the MHIT program has never been greater.

I urge you to support a permanent and sustainable funding mechanism for this program. And as the MHIT Program really is a mental health program, I also strongly support the oversight of the program be moved under KDADS.

Thank you for your time today.