

Proponent Testimony on HB 2785
House Committee on Commerce, Labor, and Economic Development
Wednesday, March 6, 2024
Secretary Janet Stanek
Kansas Department of Health and Environment

Mister Chair Tarwater and members of the House Committee on Commerce, Labor, and Economic Development:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 2785, a bill that unifies the State's early childhood care and education programs under one umbrella, designated as the Kansas Office of Early Childhood. The need to support young children and families, as well as early childhood care and education professionals, is at the heart of this bill. Everyday KDHE witnesses the struggles, confusion and lack of resources stakeholders in the early childhood arena face based on the current system, which includes overlapping requirements on providers, policy misalignment, funding streams that do not align and a lack of clear lines of authority.

The bipartisan Early Childhood Transition Task Force has met with citizens across the state over the past year, gathered feedback from external partners and collected information from state agency professionals regarding their early childhood programs. These explorations allowed the Task Force to gauge current early childhood care and education needs in Kansas. Through this process it became clear that the current system in Kansas contributes to confusion for service providers and families attempting to access resources for their young children. This leads to programmatic inefficiencies and constrains state and local leaders from addressing these issues. The first step to a solution is the Office of Early Childhood. When passed, HB 2785 will move the Kansas Department of Health and Environment's (KDHE) child care licensing (CCL) and home visiting programs into the Office of Early Childhood.

Child care licensing (CCL) is responsible for establishing and enforcing regulatory safeguards for approximately 5,000 facilities in Kansas while also processing applications and issuing licenses to those

approved. To do so, CCL employs staff across the state and manages several contracts with local county health departments to supplement state staff. CCL is primarily funded by interagency contract funds between KDHE and Department for Children and Families (DCF), who serves as the lead agency. As the lead agency, DCF administers and implements the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) program. KDHE CCL carries out the health and safety portion of the state's early childhood care plan on behalf of DCF. This plan is monitored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of Child Care. Although KDHE CCL has made vast improvements in the last year, including a historically swift regulatory review, operational changes to enhance the timeliness of the licensing process, modernization efforts and customer service improvements for those interacting with CCL, we acknowledge that the current early childhood system is still frustrating for those attempting to navigate it. Parents, providers, elected officials and others are often unsure of who to talk to or where to find resources related to child care matters.

Home visiting is a voluntary program meant to connect families to services for children ages prenatal to five in their community through in-home visits from a family support professional. Goals of home visiting are to support expecting parents, increase parenting knowledge, support healthy child development and families and support school readiness. Currently, Kansas home visiting spans multiple state agencies, is financed through numerous funding streams and comes in the form of at least seven different program models. KDHE specifically funds Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) and Universal Home Visiting (UHV) through Maternal and Child Health (MCH) programs across the state. The work of the Task Force revealed a need for increased focus on program alignment and unification of services in home visiting.

This unification of authority to oversee state early childhood care and education programs will improve the process of policy making, streamline funding opportunities, reduce red tape for stakeholders and align efforts to improve outcomes. KDHE supports the passage of HB 2785 to ease administrative burden, facilitate access to services across the state and improve the delivery and efficiency of early childhood care and education programs. This change will help address gaps and overlaps in our current system and more effectively support Kansas children and families, ultimately opening additional slots and resources for parents and providers to access.

Thank you for the opportunity to support passage of HB 2785. I am happy to stand for questions at the appropriate time.