

March 6, 2024

Walinda Arnett, Health Navigator
Barber County United
Written-Only Proponent Testimony for HB 2785
House Committee on Commerce, Labor and Economic Development

Chairman Tarwater and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony in support of HB 2785, which unifies many early childhood programs and services under the Office of Early Childhood.

Barber County United is a health-based coalition that collaborates closely with leaders and citizens locally to address needs and concerns and provides resources to create action to actively engage our communities into becoming healthier Kansans. As a navigator, I collaborate directly with individuals and families to help them obtain affordable health coverage and to actively help them access resources to assist them in their day to day lives.

I am writing today to state my strong support for the unification of services into the Kansas Office of Early Childhood Services, it is my belief that this office has been needed for a very long time. Combining services for kids and families that are currently spread across multiple agencies will be beneficial on more than one level.

First, it would help cut red tape that currently exists between the varying early childhood services which would save tax dollars by more efficiently improving our state's ability to serve families and communities more locally. I believe we can all agree steps that we can take to save tax dollars and become more efficient are a positive step in the right direction for Kansas. This office would be a positive step forward for Kansas to better serve our families.

Second, as a rural Kansan, I see firsthand the challenges presented from locations that are sometimes a drive to get to and then patrons need to know which different agencies to properly reach out to for the help they may be seeking for their family. Having combined efforts in one office would ease a burden on families ability to navigate which services are handled by which agency. Not having to sort through the ins and outs of each agency to know where to go, or which office is the correct office to contact, and how to get help could also release some of the frustration that can sometimes be felt with the challenges of our present day set up. This in turn would also create a better environment for those seeking assistance as well as those working within the office across the board.

In a way, having the Kansas Office of Early Childhood Services, would be much a like a one stop shop for services for children and families and that would be an asset for taxpayers and families across the state, which in my honest opinion is a win, win for everyone. It is time for unified Early Childhood services under one office working smarter, not harder for Kansans as a whole.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these priorities with you today. Feel free to reach me if you have any questions at walinda@barbercountyunited.org.