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Melissa Stiehler
Resident of Topeka, Kansas
Opponent Testimony of HB 2430
For the House Committee on Welfare Reform

March 1, 2023

Chair Awerkamp and members of the Committee,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I am a resident of Topeka, Kansas and I am deeply opposed to HB2430, which would criminalize homelessness and punish local governments for not prosecuting people experiencing homelessness.

First, this criminalization and institutionalization policy is completely ineffective in reducing homelessness. The United States Interagency on Homelessness, our country's national agency on finding the best policy solutions for decreasing homelessness, takes the position that a housing first policy is the most effective. They also recommend reducing criminal justice involvement in this process, calling incarceration of the homeless a "revolving door" to keep these members of our community in a cycle of poverty. In their report "Searching out Solutions," this agency specifically mentions that policies like the ones proposed in HB2430 are part of the problem. The result of implementing this law will be increasing homelessness in our state, not decreasing it, especially when taking into account that it punishes and removes local control from communities who are effectively addressing this issue outside of incarceration.

Second, this legislation is a mockery of Kansas ideals. Your constituents expect you to represent them and their values of community, empathy, and opportunity. This policy position is so shameful for our state and does not represent its people. When finding out that this legislation is a copy and paste version of the Cicero Institute's template, it became clear that supporters of this bill weren't listening to Kansans during the legislative process. For those of you unfamiliar, the founder of the Cicero Institute, Joe Lonsdale, is an out of state billionaire and investor in private prisons. The Cicero Institute's supposed "homelessness expert," Earl Glock, has no history of working in the homeless sector and the video they produced explaining the cause of homelessness is full of inaccuracies and debunked myths. They are using their deep pockets to push discredited policies like this all across the country and do not represent the will of the people of Kansas or even the positions actual experts in the field hold.

In closing, please remember that homelessness is a systemic problem- not one caused by laziness or a lack of individual will. Mass incarceration of the poorest among us will not fix this. Studies by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty have shown that homelessness is caused by issues that should be taken up by this legislative body: lack of affordable housing, unemployment, low wages, and domestic violence. Our local communities know the best solutions for taking care of themselves. I strongly urge members of this committee to please oppose HB2430 and instead support our local government in their proven housing first efforts. Thank you all for your time and I hope you take my testimony into consideration.