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Testimony before Kansas Senate Standing Committee on Public Health and Welfare
Sophia Tolentino, Manhattan

Good afternoon Madam Chair and members of the committee. My name is Sophia Tolentino. I am a senior at Manhattan High School and the younger sister of a 22-year-old brother with an intellectual disability who will never be able to live independently. He has aged out of the school system and continues to live at home with our family. I also am part of a group of seniors who serve as mentors to students with disabilities in the Manhattan High School Interpersonal Skills Class.

Appropriate language regarding persons with disabilities is an issue near to my heart. That is why – as the recently crowned Miss Manhattan – I have chosen the “Spread The Word To End The Word” campaign (www.r-word.org) campaign as my platform. This initiative, sponsored by Special Olympics, encourages people to stop using the word “retard” or “retarded” as an insult or putdown. Instead, the “R-word” we should embrace is RESPECT.

Words hurt. The term “mentally retarded” has gone from being a Latin-based medical description to a casual insult. Today, “retard” and “retarded” have been used widely as disparaging synonyms for “dumb” or “stupid.” Negative use of these words reinforces stereotypes of people with intellectual disabilities as being less valued members of humanity. They are not.

I can’t vote yet; I don’t turn 18 until late April. But I fully support SB 397 because it is a simple change of language that takes a big step in showing respect to persons with intellectual disabilities.

My brother Nick cannot speak. I speak for him and others like him in encouraging Kansas to follow federal guidelines+ that change legislative language to end the use of the words “mental retardation,” and instead replace them with language of respect.

Thank you Madam Chair and Committee Members.