

Testimony By Laura Stief of StandUp Parenting 2/18/2020

House Corrections and Juvenile Justice Committee regarding HB2505

I have been involved in StandUp Parenting for 10 years. All of the parents in StandUp Parenting have “acting out kids” which we call AOK’s. They are those children who have challenged us from early childhood onto their teen years. The first few years I was seeking help as a parent when my son was 19. After a few years of seeing the positive results in my child, I continued in a role of helping other parents. No one understands like a parent a who has gone through it. Though none of us StandUp will admit we made perfect decisions with parenting, who has? But we all have been good parents who have loved our children but have felt hopeless at controlling them. Many of us have other very functional children that have never caused a problem. We all have had the courage to seek help to change our behavior to manage our AOK’s. StandUp teaches us the only way to change our children’s behavior is to change our own parenting behavior.

Leaders in StandUp have often asked parents to consider the option of contacting the police if their child becomes threatening, violent or possesses illegal substances. From parent reports in the past, we believed police were helpful in situations where adolescents were threatening harm to self or others. Parents had fairly good success until about 2 years ago. Police would take an adolescent to detention, if warranted and/or have a somber talk with the teen.

Two years ago, after the bill 367 was passed, we started hearing different encounters with the police consistently. Though the bill was written with good intentions of reducing juvenile detentions it had some unpleasant, unintended consequences for parents in our group. Parents reported calling the police due to out of control behavior and the teen might be taken to detention but if the parent wanted to have their child “stayover” for some shock time they no longer had that option. Due to the understanding of the law, the police or detention staff would threaten the parent that they would be charged with abandonment if they did not retrieve their child that very evening. This included reports by single mothers’ who were physically threatened by their intimidating teen sons. According to some parents the police discouraged parents to have their teen taken to detention at all because he/she will just be released shortly afterwards. In the police department’s defense, I believe they felt they were doing what the new bill guided them to do. To some authorities and lawmakers, fewer charges make SB 367 look like a successful law with a result of less juvenile criminal activity.

It didn’t take long for StandUp parents to complain that their teen became aware that they can get away with anything because the law is unlikely to intervene with anything beyond diversion. **The law became the enabling parent that StandUp is trying to combat in our society today.** We feel this is causing adolescents to escalate in their behaviors and make our communities less safe. Parents in our group rely on law enforcement to help with these difficult teens who have behavior problems, addiction or mental health issues. If there were more mental health facilities, rehabilitation for youth and therapeutic environment resources in Kansas City parents might have more options. My understanding is there might be help offered by a revision of this bill where parents dealing with difficult teens could receive a respite from the constant crisis their teenage brings into their lives through no fault of their own. We support this safety net. Hopefully, the staff at a “help center” could assist the adolescent hit their bottom and turn the corner of their destructive path.

The law cracking down on my son 10 years ago saved his life. I am so proud of all the obstacles he has overcome to be a successful, employed college graduate. I am thankful for the tough love of the law. We needed the support and we received it. Our worry is that today’s Kansas teen’s damaging patterns in behavior will be long term habits over their lifetimes if they do not get the needed wake-up call from law enforcement and their community until adulthood.

There are teenagers in our community who will not get help until incarceration is threatened. This was true of my son. If he was not stopped, he would either be dead (as many of his friends) or in prison. Help us now with solutions, or everyone will all be paying for the missed opportunity today and throughout our children’s lives.