

Testimony of Judy Fowler in support of HB 2699

I am here today to support HB 2699, relating to the revised Kansas Code for Care of Children. I am an attorney; I have practiced law for nearly forty years in Sedgwick County. I spent the first few years working as an Assistant District Attorney, assigned to the Juvenile Division. I then practiced in other areas before returning to the Juvenile Court system in 2013. I am currently a member of the panel of Sedgwick County attorneys who are Court appointed to represent parents whose children are named in Child in Need of Care (CINC) Petitions.

As an attorney who encounters the juvenile court system nearly every day, I have become familiar with Sedgwick County's huge juvenile caseload and its impact on our children and their parents. The goal of the system is to reintegrate children with appropriate parents, and when parents are not appropriate, to ensure that children find permanency in other ways as quickly as possible. Many, many professionals are involved in this system, including the Court Services Officers (CSO) who are a very important part of the Sedgwick County court system.

The CSO position has been a part of the Juvenile Court system in Sedgwick County since, I believe, the 1970's. I relied on their expertise and assistance when I was a part of the system in the early 1980's. I have personally relied on their expertise and assistance since I returned to working in the Juvenile system in the early 2010's. I believe the men and women who serve as CSO's serve a vital role in the administration of juvenile justice in Sedgwick County.

Sedgwick County has, by far, the most CINC cases filed of any county in the State, and our county has the most children in out of home placement. The last two years has seen an average of 1100+ children in foster care at any given time. I understand that this is more than twice the number in any other county. We have four judges assigned to the Juvenile Division; each does both CINC cases and Juvenile Offender cases. In 2018, there were 3648 CINC court hearings, which is more than 900 hearings per judge.

Briefly, some of the duties performed by the CSOs are:

- Serving parents and other interested parties with the petition
- Assisting parents with completing necessary forms, such as financial affidavit and ICWA forms
- Acting as liaison with the Clerk's office to ensure that data is complete (names, addresses, telephone numbers, grandparents' information, etc.)
- Informing parents of Child Support obligations
- Informing parents of the existence of other agencies/ programs which will be available to them such as CASA, Parent Ally, etc.
- Attending all court hearings, and recording important information on Court Minute Sheets
- Assisting the Court by conducting UAs and BAs and informing the Court of the results (more than 1100 such tests in 2018)
- Assisting the Court by conducting DNA swabbing for paternity testing (more than 200 in 2018)

- Completing orders to transport for parents incarcerated by the KDOC or in the Sedgwick County Adult Detention Facility
- Assisting the Court by answering inquiries in person and by phone from parents, grandparents, foster placement and other interested persons
- Assisting the Courts with ensuring that Federal timelines are met
- Providing written reports to the Courts prior to each Court hearing

In addition to these functions, CSOs provide many other services to the Court system. They often attend DCF contractor St. Francis Ministries' Case Plan meetings, Best Interest Staffings, Coordination of Care meetings, CASA staffings, Mental Health staffings, Multi-Disciplinary Staffings, and other meetings and staffings. In cases where the CINC child is not placed in DCF custody, the CSO essentially manages the entire case. They are responsible for developing permanency, visitation, safety, and reintegration plans. They conduct home assessments, communicate with parents regarding court orders, communicate with service providers, including medical providers, therapists/ counselors, teachers, daycare providers, etc.

I believe that the CSOs provide indispensable and irreplaceable assistance to the Courts and parties in all CINC cases. Quite simply, there is no one else to do the work they do. I believe the Courts, the parents, appointed counsel, and most importantly, the children will suffer harm if the CSO position is eliminated. I believe that the CSOs provide accountability for DCF and its contractors. The issues with DCF and its contractors are well documented. Many of the most unfortunate cases, some involving children who died, have come from Sedgwick County. CSOs monitor all cases and report lapses in services to the Court.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I appreciate your consideration. I am very hopeful that HB 2699 is enacted, ensuring that Court Service Officers may continue to serve the judges, parents, and most importantly, children of our great State.