

State of Kansas

Senate Chamber

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Chair Warren and Senate Colleagues of the Judiciary Committee:

I rise in support of SB 301 that would establish the Office of the Child Advocate in Kansas.

Long before I joined the legislature, I'd read news articles that detailed horrifying instances of Kansas children on the receiving end of neglect and abuse from parents, parent partners, foster parents, agency employees and contracted employees. What is most disturbing about these stories is the fact that, most often, there were adults that were fully aware of the dire circumstances of the child but chose to do nothing or their message of warning was ignored.

The time is NOW for Kansas legislators to form the Office of the Child Advocate. It will serve as a resource or clearinghouse for "whistle blowers" so that steps of action can occur to protect our most vulnerable children. I hope you can agree that this will be far more proactive than waiting for a "confidential" source to feed a story to the media, who must then wade through documents received through a KORA request.

I believe the OCA will help our state by:

- Investigating claims of abuse by children within the Foster Care system.
- Taking meaningful action with regard to the delays that occur in children receiving needed services including mental health treatment – which in the fall DCF stated they couldn't quantify how long the delay of services have been.
- Helping assure children have the opportunity for weekly visits with family, which is a policy of DCF.
- Serving as a needed clearinghouse when no action is taken by DCF on behalf of a possible child victim – knowing that nearly 67 thousand reports of alleged child abuse/neglect were received by DCF in FY 2020 and that 57% of those reports were assigned for investigation.

This is a 'big bite at the OCA apple.' Please help vet this bill so that we can work to reduce the number of children in the Foster Care system, address the racial disproportionate rates of foster children and stop the ongoing cycle of foster reentry.

Respectfully submitted,

Molly Baumgardner