



EQUALITY ♦ LAW ♦ JUSTICE

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Written-Only Proponent for HB 2151
Senate Public Health & Welfare Committee
March 23, 2021

Chairman Hilderbrand and members of the Committee:

My name is Mike Burgess. I am the Director of Policy & Outreach at the Disability Rights Center of Kansas (DRC). DRC is a public interest legal advocacy organization that is part of a national network of federally mandated organizations empowered to advocate for Kansans with disabilities. DRC is the officially designated protection and advocacy system in Kansas. DRC is a private, 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation, organizationally independent of state government and whose sole interest is the protection of the legal rights of Kansans with disabilities.

I am writing today to share our support for HB 2151, which would create Kansas elder and dependent adult abuse multidisciplinary teams and a coordinator.

This bill will help foster communication between a number of agencies who are working on cases involving elders and dependent adults. Communication can always be improved, and this bill will help better ensure that multiple agencies communicate more effectively with these issues.

Unfortunately, the Kaufman House case is one of the most notorious cases of abuse, neglect, and exploitation of individuals with disabilities and serves as a prime example of what can go wrong when agencies do not effectively communicate with one another.

In the fall of 2004, headlines broke out across the nation about a mental health group home in Newton Kansas, the Kaufman House, which was abusing persons with mental illness who resided there. Prosecutors rightfully called it a “house of horrors,” as residents were sexually, physically and emotionally abused for years with no coordinated response to stop the abuse. DRC assisted several residents of the group home to leave that abusive situation. For more than 20 years, the victims were subjected to bizarre and terrible sexual abuse, physical abuse and what prosecutors described as “involuntary servitude.” They were forced to use a bucket as a toilet, walk around the house naked, do chores and farm the fields naked, were victims of sexual assault and other horrible abuses, all under the guise of “therapy.”

One of the most troubling aspects of this case is the fact that the State of Kansas knew about the terrible abuses for more than 20 years, but the different agencies of government were never able to coordinate efforts or get residents out of the Kaufman house. More than 12 reports of abuse and neglect were made to the State, including four reports from former residents or their families, yet the State seemed powerless to stop the abuse.

Thankfully, the Office of the Kansas Attorney General called on the Disability Rights Center of Kansas and asked us to use our access authority under federal law and to conduct an investigation of the Kaufman House. DRC’s special investigation authority under federal law, as the Protection and Advocacy agency, allowed DRC to access the Kaufman House and speak to the residents free from the Kaufman’s influence. One of the residents hired our attorney to represent her on the spot and to get her out of that abusive, horrible place. She simply said, I don’t want to be naked anymore.

Thanks to this coordination of the Disability Rights Center, Kansas Attorney General, and US Attorney's office, federal authorities to shut down the Kaufman house in six months, whereas other agencies couldn't stop the abuse for more than 20 years. The successful coordination between different entities to shut down the Kaufman House is reflected in and further supported by this bill.

In response to the Kaufman House case, the Kansas Legislature passed a law to provide enhanced support for the Attorney General to better prevent these type of abuses. Since that time other states have shown the multidisciplinary teams in this bill to provide even better coordination. We believe this bill will improve Kansas' ability to coordinate and support efforts to hold wrongdoers accountable for the abuse, neglect or exploitation they perpetrate against Kansas seniors and people with disabilities. We strongly support the Office of the Kansas Attorney General and their efforts to combat this abuse, neglect and exploitation. We also strongly support this bill. We see this bill as an important tool and next step to help improve and better coordinate the fight against those who perpetrate abuse, neglect or exploitation against seniors and people with disabilities.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our support for HB2151.