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**Written testimony in Support of HB2187, Office of the Child Advocate
House Committee on Children and Seniors, Rep. Susan Concannon, Chair
February 20, 2020**

Mme. Chair, Ranking Member Ousley, Members of the committee:

My name is Rev. Sarah Oglesby-Dunegan, I serve as a minister of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Topeka and as board chair of Kansas Interfaith Action, or KIFA, which I am representing today. I write in support of HB 2187, which seeks to create an independent agency to provides oversight as well as solutions to child welfare interventions. This bill offers a much needed and missing piece of the puzzle as the State of Kansas seeks to address the crisis of our dysfunctional child welfare system. We know that this system has been inundated with children and has struggled to find placements for them, keep track of them once placed, communicate and complete normal administrative tasks in consistent, professional and timely manner, and even to keep children safe while in custody awaiting placement. This bill would address that.

As a pastor, I have communicated with numerous people who have been in contact with child welfare, either because they are parents whose children are in custody, family members of someone whose child is in custody, or foster care providers. I have also communicated with young adults who have aged out of this system. One thing seems to be consistently reported: when folks are dealing with contractors like KVC or St. Francis, most people have struggled with very basic things like getting their case worker to call them back or respond to correspondence, getting needed resources to support a child in care in a timely or consistent manner, and being able to submit complaints or make requests to a higher level of authority than the case worker.

In addition, many more children of color than white children are placed away from their families, which underscores that systemic racism plagues every level of government in our state, making it even harder for these families and children to find redress for problems they encounter.

While there may be many reasons for these problems, including a large number of kids in custody, it is unacceptable. An Office of the Child Advocate would provide an independent office to review these kinds of issues and complaints and center the needs of the child, not the agency contracted to provide the services.

The idea of this office came from extensive study from the 2018 Child Welfare System Task Force, noting that Kansas is one of the few states to not establish such an office. Thus, Kansas continues to be one of the states where government is least transparent and accountable, a situation which is both expensive and yields poor outcomes. As a former public administrator, this is appalling.

As a minister and voice for people of faith, this is morally abhorrent. Children are a vulnerable population and need **us** to be the grown ups in the room--the caring protectors, mentors, and leaders we purport to be. There are many other steps we need to take to address the egregious problems in this system, but this needs to be one of the first steps we take in order to sort out the current problems.

For all of these reasons, we encourage you to recommend HB 218 to the full House for passage.

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