

Testimony for Jeremy Johnson
Opponent for HB 2445

Joint Committee on Corrections and Juvenile Justice Oversight
Hearing 1/28/2020

Dear committee members:

My name is Jeremy Johnson. I've served as a foster parent, and have worked professionally with kids in foster care for four years.

During my time working with children in foster care as a KanCare Health Homes coordinator at Community Health Center of Southeast Kansas, and as the Jobs for America's Graduates - Kansas (JAG-K) specialist at Pittsburg High School, I worked with kids whose home lives were in total disarray, with parents who were absent or, thanks to the ill effects of generational poverty, struggling to care for their children. These children longed for connection with adults, but deeply distrusted institutional systems, since these were one of the main sources of pain in their lives--teachers and school administrators who saw them only as trouble, state agencies that separated them from their families. In their view, it wasn't entirely their parents fault for their suffering, since it was systems of the state that failed them and allowed their poverty to continue or worsen, that told them to "do better" without providing them any resources to do so. And having spent time with these kids and having earned their trust, I can't blame them; after all, if the misery of their lives continues unabated into adulthood, is it even conscionable to expect anything but more of the same from them?

Having seen this suffering up close, my wife and I took the opportunity to take in a student we'd both had in our classes. As teachers who had worked with high school students for more than a decade between us, we wanted to provide a space that would provide some respite from the daily trauma we had seen these kids experience. So when he ran away, though it would've been easy to see his actions as a personal failure, we knew better. The effects of a lifetime of instability and disregard for one's wellbeing are not quickly undone.

The kinds of reactions foster kids sometimes elicit, such as running away, cannot be understood as crimes requiring punishment. They must be seen as actions of desperation in response to trauma, which is inherent in a system that separates parents and children, even if that separation is intended as a positive intervention. Because trauma plays such an outsized role, it is imperative that such a system balance it with nurturing, understanding, and provision of care. Many of the problems the state has seen in its foster care system over the past decade stem directly from such factors being absent--underfunding and lack of oversight have contributed directly to such a large number of runaways and deaths of foster children. Adequate funding for a broken system is the only way to work to undo the carnage that trauma has sown in foster children's lives.

I cannot urge you strongly enough to vote against this bill. Foster care runaways are not "bad kids" in need of punishment--which is precisely what juvenile detention is. They are children who've experienced more than their share of chaos and trauma, who need understanding, nurturing, and a system that cares for them and their wellbeing, both physical and emotional.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeremy Johnson
Pittsburg