



**Proponent Testimony on HB2468
House Committee on Children and Seniors
March 16, 2022**

Chair Concannon, Vice Chair Esau, Ranking Member Ousley, and Members of the Committee, my name is Rachel Marsh, CEO of the Children's Alliance of Kansas. The Alliance is an association of 21 private, non-profit child welfare agencies that collectively provide a full array of services for children and families in child abuse and neglect prevention, family preservation, foster care, adoption, independent living, and parent, youth, and child skill-building, mental health, and substance use treatment. Our members serve children in foster care through reintegration and adoption case management services, foster care and kinship home supports, specialized residential placements, and psychiatric residential treatment (PRTF). In some areas, our members also provide outpatient and in-home behavioral health care services.

We appreciate the goals and purposes of HB 2468, the foster youth bill of rights. We support the need for a clear statement of foster youth rights. Youth, especially older youth, need information with which they can ask questions and advocate for their voices to be heard and their opinions and desires to be considered. We support the bill with our reading and understanding that the language of the bill is intended to be consistent with the policy of the State in KSA 38-2201, the Kansas Child in Need of Care Code.

There are a few suggestions we would offer.

- (1) Regarding privacy to send and receive unopened mail and make and receive phone calls

We serve children that suffer from emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, at the hands of family members; and some children enter care after being identified as survivors of human trafficking. We would request that section (13) privacy rights be amended to, "if consistent with the best interests of the child." While we believe such limitation is inherent within the framework of the bill, we would request a specific amendment so that no future case manager sees this as black and white, to ensure child safety and wellbeing remains paramount in considerations of mail and phone calls.

- (2) Regarding supporting youth relationships and contact with relatives and close connections

HB 2468 does recognize the importance of family connections in a foster youth's life by including the right for youth to have visits with their family, be placed with siblings when possible, and to be placed with a relative or someone from such child's community with similar religious beliefs or ethnic heritage. The Alliance would like to suggest elaborating on these rights to further stress the importance of defining and maintaining relationships important to them. For instance, we believe that children have a right to have important individuals identified early in the service plan and for these individuals to first be considered as placement options if appropriate. We also would note that "family" and meaningful connections are not always limited to blood relatives of the child. Meaningful and lasting relationships

for youth create normalcy, lead to better outcomes, and make a difference. Foster youth have a right to maintain relationships that are important to them while in foster care.

(3) Regarding the need for increased youth engagement in court

We would suggest that the Kansas could go further in ensuring a child has the right to seek a separate attorney from the child's guardian ad litem. This Committee might consider providing a specific addition to existing code section 38-2205 regarding when the court might appoint an attorney for the child; specifically, that good cause shown for appointing an attorney for the child could include the lack of regular contact or communication between the guardian ad litem and the child.

We would be happy to work with the committee members to explore considerations that would further strengthen this important piece of legislation. Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts on HB 2468.

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Members of the Children's Alliance of Kansas:

The Bridge of Topeka, Topeka
CALM, Emporia
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DCCCA, Lawrence
Eckerd, Wichita
EmberHope, Wichita
Florence Crittenton, Topeka
FosterAdopt Connect, Olathe
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KVC Kansas, Olathe
KidsTLC, Olathe
Restoration Family Services, Wichita
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