



**Written Testimony to
House Committee on Child Welfare and Foster Care
on House Bill 2443**

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Chairwoman Concannon and members of the Committee, my name is Kyle Kessler. I am the Executive Director for the Association of Community Mental Health Centers of Kansas, Inc. The Association represents the 26 licensed Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) in Kansas that provide behavioral health services in all 105 counties, 24-hours a day, seven days a week. In Kansas, CMHCs are the local Mental Health Authorities coordinating the delivery of publicly funded community-based mental health services. As part of licensing regulations, CMHCs are required to provide services to all Kansans needing them, regardless of their ability to pay. This makes the community mental health system the “safety net” for Kansans with behavioral health needs.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 2443, which would establish the office of child advocate. This concept has been around in one iteration or another for a few years now, and we are pleased to see that House Bill 2443 has addressed many of the concerns we have voiced in the past.

We support efforts to improve the child welfare system and to put in place mechanisms for families who struggle to navigate the system or who need the support of an impartial ombudsman-type authority to resolve concerns and complaints. In previous iterations of the office of child advocate concept, we have had concerns with how treatment records could or would be requested by the office, and we are very glad to see that House Bill 2443 addresses these concerns. It appears that this legislation builds upon the current standards in the child in need of care code in terms of how information may be handled and obtained by the office, and we feel that this aspect of the bill is not only very important, but vital to ensure confidentiality and maintain the patient-provider relationship.

As you know, CMHCs provide treatment and services to the most vulnerable among us, including children and youth who have been traumatized by abuse and neglect and have been removed from the home or who are at risk of being removed from the home. The ability to build and maintain a trusting relationship with patients and their families, while ensuring confidentiality, is vital to the therapeutic process.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony.