



House Committee on Child Welfare and Foster Care

January 24, 2024

Chair Concannon, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Minority Member Ousley and members of the Committee:

I'm Danielle Bartelli, LPC, Vice President of Operations at KVC Kansas, a nonprofit dedicated to enriching and enhancing the lives of children and families. Our team is honored to be the foster care case management provider in two of Kansas' eight catchment areas.

I stand before you today to express KVC Kansas' enthusiastic support for HB 2536: "Establishing the SOUL Family legal permanency option for children 16 years of age or older." This groundbreaking permanency option, designed by and for young people who have experienced foster care, addresses a crucial need for older youth at risk of aging out without connections or a permanent family.

SOUL Family provides an alternative for youth not eligible or open to traditional permanency options. It allows them to identify a primary legal relationship with one or more caregivers (who do not have to be related) and long-term relationships with other caring adults all while maintaining legal ties with birth parents and siblings without terminating parental rights unnecessarily.

Why Do Kansas Youth Need a SOUL Family?

To emphasize the urgency of SOUL Family, consider the reality in Kansas foster care catchment areas three and six, where nearly 20% of the youth KVC currently serves are 16 years of age and older. Since October 1, 2019, 486 youth in the same areas aged out of foster care. On top of that, nationally, over 20,000 youth age out annually – that's more than 55 youth every day. These young people often face challenges in education, employment, housing and mental health due to the absence of a permanent family support system. SOUL Family aims to break this cycle, offering legal relationships, stability and support.

On average, older youth have longer stays in foster care, and SOUL Family could significantly reduce this time. Opting for the SOUL Family legal permanency option ensures that youth do not lose eligibility for vital services, resources, and aid crucial for their successful transition to young adulthood.

Undoubtedly, you are familiar with the saying, 'It takes a village,' and SOUL Family demonstrates the true meaning behind those words. The significance of offering youth in foster care a secure legal connection and a group of supportive adults they can turn to for any problem, question or celebration, cannot be emphasized enough.



Who Would Benefit from a SOUL Family?

Kate's story (name changed for privacy), while deeply personal, serves as a meaningful example of the need for SOUL Family legal permanency option. After years in foster care and reunification with her parents no longer possible, Kate faced the challenges of multiple placements, enduring trauma, and a sense of detachment. KVC's persistent efforts led to the location of her older sister, resulting in a transformative period of stability and connection. Living with her sister brought Kate a stable school, connection to her family roots, and a stronger family bond.

As KVC discussed Kate's goals around permanency, her resistance to traditional adoption became evident. Despite her sister's willingness to adopt, Kate saw their relationship differently and was hesitant to alter it through adoption. Without tailored options like SOUL Family, Kate and others face aging out without the legal, lasting family that SOUL Family would guarantee. Despite having continued support and unconditional love from her sister, Kate's circle of trusted, caring adults lacked legal definition. SOUL Family would have provided an alternative solution for legal permanency that met both Kate and her older sister's wishes to remain siblings and allowed Kate to exit the foster care system. The introduction of SOUL Family would ensure that youths like Kate have a pathway to lasting connections and a legal sense of family as they navigate the challenges of adulthood.

In conclusion, SOUL Family is an innovative approach to forming permanent legal families. Adoption, reunification, and guardianship are existing legal permanency options, but they do not meet many young people's needs. SOUL Family would add a vital opportunity for older youth to have a say in their families and their futures. This solution aligns with the essence of family, offering support, opportunity, unity, and legal relationships that all young people need to thrive.

Thank you for your time and consideration in supporting SOUL Family.