

January 24, 2024

Min. Nina Shaw-Woody  
Written-Only Proponent Testimony on HB 2536  
House Committee on Child Welfare and Foster Care

Chair Concannon, Ranking Member Ousely and Members of the House Committee on Child Welfare and Foster Care:

My name is Min. Nina Shaw-Woody and I am the Executive Director of the Ministry of Kansas Family Advisory Network. I am here today to speak in support of House Bill 2536, the SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option.

As a previous foster and adoptive parent, in my role as executive director of a nonprofit, as well as in my new role as a kinship caregiver, I have witnessed firsthand the many children and families separated for different reasons. These very children and families found themselves caught up in the child welfare system, lost, frightened, and confused. Parents and caregivers struggle to meet the expectations placed upon them and to watch already precarious relationships now become strained by the additional trauma inflicted on them. With many parents and caregivers falling victim of defeat to an unforgiving system. Children then lose important caregiver relationships. Parents and caregivers, during this season of their lives, could not overcome the shame, the embarrassment, the addiction, the demands and the scrutiny on their lives.

Long before foster care became available in the United States, families would utilize other friends and family members to care for their children regardless of whatever the parent issues were. Kinship care and non-related kinship care was already taking place, the community came together to help each other. No one judged the other because everyone knew what it was like to struggle. This continues even to today, but with a different look...SOUL Family.

The beautiful benefit of SOUL Family is that parents and caregivers' rights do not have to be severed in order for the child to find the permanency they so want & deserve. Over the 20 plus years in this arena, I have seen parents whose rights were terminated, completely transform their lives but were unable to see their children any longer. I have also witnessed those parents whose rights were terminated and were able to come back to later adopt their children that were still lingering in the foster care system due to the positive changes they made. Neither of these scenarios would have to happen with the SOUL Family.

Youth would have the best of both worlds, permanency and an intact relationship with not only parents or caregivers, but extended family members as well. Youth would be able to decide how much contact they want with their biological family while living in and with the family of their choosing. Parental rights do not have to be severed in order for that youth to find happiness.

My prayer is that you would all approve this bill as a legal permanency option for you.

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