



ZERO TO THRIVE

Kansas Child Care & Early Development Coalition



March 6, 2024

Logan Stenseng, Policy Coordinator

Thrive Allen County/Thrive Kansas

Verbal Proponent Testimony for HB 2785

House Committee on Commerce, Labor and Economic Development

Chairman Tarwater and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony in support of HB 2785. I work for Thrive Kansas, and lead our Zero to Thrive Early Childhood & Child Care Coalition efforts. Our name is Zero to Thrive because of how pivotal the first five years of life are to a child's brain development and their opportunities for a bright future. We have traveled the state the past 3 years, connecting with families and providers of all kinds, urban and rural, with one mission: find and advocate for policy solutions that meet the needs of community members and stakeholders in Kansas child care. We assisted in circulating a statewide sign-on support letter that was signed by over 700 Kansas organizations and individuals- ranging from early childhood educators, businesses, urban and rural economic development organizations, health organizations, and many others from across our state in support of HB 2785 and the Office of Early Childhood.

At one of our rural child success roadtrip events in 2022, I met with a provider in Canton, Kansas. As we talked she mentioned that food costs had been especially high for her program and it was a considerable financial stressor for her center. I asked if she had heard of the Child and Adult Food Care Program (CAFCP), and she said she had heard of it but had never been connected to it- her main connections were with KDHE through her local surveyor and the fire marshal. They had not worked with DCF because dealing with KDHE was enough hassle for their program, and working with DCF to jump through additional hoops and new bureaucrats was another challenge. As an outside party whose main focus is finding any and all ways to connect this child care provider to resources to help them remain afloat and thrive, I made the

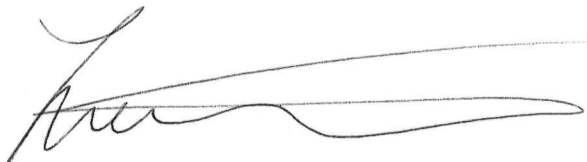
connection with their program and CACFP and tried to dispel some of their concerns about working with the DCF child care assistance program. It shouldn't take an outside, random person to make those connections to support a vital, rural child care program. Delays and hurdles in an overall fragmented system of early childhood support have been a burden to our locals for years.

Navigating numerous government bureaucracies, with different missions and personnel that are disconnected, is massively frustrating for our local early childhood educators, economic leaders, and working families- which then creates a headache for businesses who rely on all of them. For our rural communities facing decline, critical resources and infrastructure are essential to bringing and keeping families and businesses in our communities. Saving our small and large businesses' lost revenue due to the ever-expanding costs of the child care crisis in Kansas should be a priority- especially when it's a cost-effective, and common-sense solution like forming the Kansas Office of Early Childhood. We need to maximize the effectiveness and coordination among our services designed to support young working families and the child care programs that businesses depend on.

The Kansas Children's Cabinet strategic plan is aptly called, "All-In for Kansas Kids". When you talk to any Kansan about the value they place on the protection and education of our children, it ranks among their primary priorities and values. There should be an Office of Early Childhood to embody those values. By unifying our programs/services geared towards early childhood, our locals and state legislative leaders can ensure our values are prioritized and guide our agency's mission more effectively than can be done in our current, fragmented approach to supporting early childhood in Kansas.

The critical time of early childhood must be protected, prioritized, and systems should work in tandem with one another to make the most efficient use of our taxpayer dollars. It is for this reason we support HB 2785, and the unification of our services/programs in the Kansas Office of Early Childhood Services. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony, if you have any questions you can reach me at logan@thriveallencounty.org

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Logan Stenseng', written over a horizontal line.

Logan Stenseng, Policy Coordinator