Madam Chair, Madam Vice Chair, Ranking Minority Member and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Tara Wallace. I am a child trauma therapist and clinical social worker. A Kansan, born and raised.

I became involved with the child welfare system as president of the Kansas African American Foster Care/Adoption Coalition in 2014. The coalition focused on educating Kansans about factors contributing to the overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system of Kansas, namely poverty.

As a member of the Governor’s Child Welfare System Task Force Protective Services and Family Preservation work group, I fully supported recommendations providing differential responses for high-risk newborns and non-abuse neglect reports because evidence proved that many of these situations undeservedly contributed to the significant rise in children in state custody for non-abuse neglect reasons which were often founded in situational poverty.

Evidence also showed that in the absence of prevention and early intervention services, the child welfare system becomes a catalyst for the very cycle it is intended to disrupt. Not only that, but it also creates a cycle of generational poverty which many families have yet to escape.

One year into the coalition’s education efforts we found a copy of the ‘Equity in Kansas Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice System” report to the governor from 2009. That report indicated African Americans represented 6.2% of the state’s population, while African American children represented a disproportionate 20% in state custody and 29% in the juvenile justice system. Today, per DCF’s website African American children represent 21% of children in state custody while African American’s represent roughly 5.9% of the state’s population.

To say that we have achieved some success in child welfare over the last year is a good thing and should be recognized. But to know that since the fall of 2009, the numbers for African American children in child welfare are almost the same today, is disheartening. Words like disparity and overrepresentation have become devalued. We no longer recognize the lives attached to them. If we have said one of those words during a meeting, we have checked the obligatory box to ease our conscience until an African American child’s face appears under a headline in the newspaper or as the lead-in on the evening news. And then it’s time to get serious about this issue regarding our children.

When did they stop being our children? They never have. All of us are here today because we want to create a better Kansas for all children. If we can start there and be at peace with what health and happiness looks like for other families in Kansas, I believe the numbers would look a lot less like 2009 than they do today.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

Tara D. Wallace, MSW, LSCSW, CTF-CBT/PSB, RYT, SLC