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Testimony in Opposition to SB 501

Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare, Sen. Richard Hilderbrand, Chair

March 10, 2022

Mr. Chair, Ranking Member Pettey, members of the Committee:

Thank you for hearing my testimony today. My name is Rabbi Moti Rieber and I am the executive director of Kansas Interfaith Action, a statewide, multi-faith organization that advocates on behalf of people of faith and the public on important policy issues. We represent several of the primary Mainline denominations, as well as Jewish and Muslim communities and individuals throughout the state. We stand in opposition to SB501.

Faith leaders and denominational bodies are very concerned about the impact of this bill on families in need. The primary concern of the faith communities that make up KIFA is for the dignity and well-being of our poorest citizens. To give only one example, the ELCA released a social statement called "Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All."¹ I've included the direct link to the text in a footnote, but among the principles are:

- God's concern is "for all," but God has special concern for people who are poor.
- The ELCA commits to addressing the causes of poverty and calls for particular scrutiny of policies that affect the poorest people with the aim of investing to improve their lives.

And a quote:

"The ELCA is committed to defend human dignity, to stand with poor and powerless people, to advocate justice, to work for peace, and to care for the earth in the processes and structures of contemporary society."

Kansas Interfaith Action opposes SB 501 because it, like similar measures in past years, does not comport with these principles. It does not address the causes of poverty, and does not help people raise themselves out of poverty, but rather presumes the bad intentions of people in need and makes them jump through all kinds of hoops in order to get the little bit of help that this legislature is willing to give them.

Our argument is threefold:

First, and most important, SB501 is an attack on the dignity of our most vulnerable citizens. Navigating eligibility for work and family supports in Kansas is already an onerous task. When our better off citizens

¹ https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Economic_LifeSS.pdf

get tax breaks, or when businesses get incentives, we don't spend our time tracking whether they are fraudulent; this is only reserved for poor people. This bill adds further hoops for them to jump through, including for such regular events as a change in income or a death in the family. Forcing people off of assistance through burdensome requirements is not the same thing as alleviating poverty. Rather, it leaves more people adrift, without the supports that would really help them climb out of poverty.

Second, this is a big government solution, asking underfunded state agencies to spend their limited resources on redundant cross-checking measures. It will lead to agencies that are supposed to be helping people, instead doing invasive cross-checking. The cost of enforcement is likely to be far greater than the cost of the benefits of the program.

And thirdly, SB 501 will have a negative impact on the charitable sector, including food pantries run by churches and other places of worship in rural and urban communities across Kansas. These churches and community centers have faced additional pressure due to the economic strain caused by COVID for the last two years. The charitable sector is already overwhelmed and cannot meet the needs of even more food insecure Kansans, which is what will happen if SB 501 goes into effect and families lose the food assistance benefits for which they are eligible. Kansas' food insecurity rate is already 12.1% (more than 350,000 people) and SB 501 will make it worse. This bill furthers food insecurity by burying struggling Kansans in paperwork. If this bill is passed, charitable food pantries will pay the price.

For the human dignity of poor people, for good public policy and effective anti-poverty measures, and for the sake of the charitable sector, I urge you to oppose SB 501.

I am happy to take questions at the appropriate time.