

March 1, 2023

Chair Averkamp and Members of the Committee on Welfare Reform:

I write today as a licensed Master social worker in the state of Kansas who has been working with those experiencing homelessness in Wyandotte county for the past 8 years at several organizations. I also write representing PeaceWorks KC, a local peace nonprofit with members across the Kansas City metro. We oppose House Bill 2430 as it will exacerbate the problem of homelessness in our state.

With my experience with this population, I certainly applaud and welcome any legislation that would help reduce homelessness in our state. Homelessness is a devastating problem both for the individual and for society, and we have seen an increase in homelessness in our state over the past several years. However, when we talk about homelessness we need to remember we are talking about *people* experiencing homelessness. People like myself and like all members of the Kansas legislative body, with dreams, with passions, with people who love them, with value. And for one reason or another they have found themselves in the unfortunate situation where they do not have a house to go to at night. I have numerous colleagues who themselves have been in this situation. The problem of homelessness cannot be separated from those people experiencing it.

As we look for solutions to homelessness, we want to make sure that the solutions proposed are going to work and that they will not make it harder for people to get into housing. HB2430 moves us in the wrong direction. Consistently in my work with those who are homeless, one of the biggest barriers to get into stable housing are people's legal history. Criminal convictions can make it difficult for someone to get into housing for years after they have served the sentence for their crime. Any legislative action which could result in more criminal convictions for those experiencing homelessness, particularly when the only crime is being homeless, will make it harder for people to get into housing and therefore moves us further away from the solution. Wyandotte county outreach workers have formed a strong alliance with local law enforcement to collaboratively help those experiencing homelessness. This collaboration with community policing helps connect those experiencing homelessness get connected to services to help resolve their housing crisis rather than using valuable resources moving them through the criminal justice system for petty offenses related to their homelessness.

There is a deep pool of research into what does work to solve homelessness. In short, the solution is simple: the solution to homelessness is housing. When people are on the streets it is very difficult to work on resolving the underlying factors leading to someone's homelessness, such as physical health, employment, legal issues, and mental health. More resources for affordable housing and supportive housing programs have been shown to provide the stability people need to get back on their feet again. For a couple years, I was a program manager of one such housing program and saw firsthand the impact of housing with supportive services to impact lives. One client, Jonathan (not real name) comes to mind. He had been homeless for over a year before coming into our program. Previously he had had a strong work history and had even been a manager at a fast food restaurant. However the dual struggles of mental health and addiction made it difficult for him to maintain housing. In our program Jonathan was able to have the stability to start working on his goals. He had some serious ups and downs and had to try multiple housing placements before finding long-term stability. However, Jonathan eventually was able to start working full-time and was doing well enough that he graduated from our program into section 8 program where he would continue to get rent supports but without the intensity of supportive services. Within a couple years on section 8 he was working full-time, taking care of his health, and regularly attending 12-step meetings. He was earning enough that he no baraeily even needed the

housing voucher anymore. Jonathan was and is certainly a success, but it wasn't an easy success. Without the ongoing support and multiple chances in the housing program, he would likely have ended up homeless again. Unfortunately, there is not enough affordable housing and not enough supportive housing programs to meet the need. With more resources devoted to housing we could see a dramatic decrease in homelessness in our state. Those experiencing homelessness in large part are not accessing housing resources because they don't want to, but they're not accessing them because there is not enough to go around.

This goes for emergency shelter as well. At the last Point in Time count, the annual event where we attempt to count all the people experiencing homelessness in the city, there were 201 people in Wyandotte county experiencing homelessness. On that same night there were zero permanent emergency shelter beds in Wyandotte county. This in one of the areas with the highest concentrations of unsheltered homelessness. The only emergency shelter we have is one that operates only on the coldest nights of the year. The rest of the time those experiencing homelessness have no other option but to find some public place to stay. Low barrier emergency shelters with connections to supportive services can be a helpful step in someone's journey to housing. At the KCK cold weather shelter, we have seen emergency shelter as a good way to engage guests in solution focused housing conversations and to connect them to ongoing housing services. However, people cannot access emergency shelter if it doesn't exist.

In conclusion, I want the legislature to think carefully about how we try to go about solving the problem of homelessness. I would encourage us to use our valuable resources on housing solutions that have been proven to work and not on criminalizing homelessness which will make the problem even worst. HB2430 is a step in the wrong direction, and we encourage the committee to not move forward with this legislation.

Sincerely,

Nehemiah Rosell, LMSW

Member of PeaceWorks Kansas City