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Testimony by Rabbi Moti Rieber in Opposition to HB 2430 – Flat Tax Bill

House Committee on Welfare Reform, Rep. Francis Awerkamp, Chair

March 2, 2023

Mr. Chair, members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony this morning. My name is Rabbi Moti Rieber; I am executive director of Kansas Interfaith Action, a statewide, multi-faith issue-advocacy organization that “puts faith into action” by educating, engaging and advocating on behalf of people of faith and the public regarding critical social, economic and climate justice issues. I stand today in strong opposition to HB 2430.

For the communities of faith that make up KIFA, there is probably no issue that unites us in mission and purpose as much as care and concern for the poor. I spent yesterday morning speaking to the ecumenical ministers’ council in Emporia, and they told me that in the face that all the issues that divide us, ministering to homeless people is one of the issues that unites us. Whether that’s the Family Promise shelter program, or making sure the food kitchen is open on days that schools are closed for snow, or making sure that poor students have adequate school supplies, faith communities consider care and concern for the unhoused to be a key element of their mission.

I refer to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s social statement, “Homelessness: A Renewal of Commitment.” It notes that

homelessness persists as a reality for hundreds of thousands of people in the United States, despite its immense wealth and resources. The message states that housing is a fundamental right even though policies and practices of government and economic institutions are not adequately responding. It reminds us that in the Bible, God heard the cries of the homeless and that working for justice with and for homeless people is doing God’s will and work in the world.¹

In its paper Faith-Based Organizations: Fundamental Partners In Ending Homelessness, the National Alliance to End Homelessness notes the role of faith-based organizations in serving on the front lines of America’s homelessness crisis and says

Faith-based providers frequently reported that a significant shortage of affordable and available housing is both a driver of and an impediment to addressing homelessness. Providers expressed concern in finding housing for clients particularly housing that is affordable once a subsidy ends. In addition, organizations cited that stagnant wages make it challenging, if not impossible, for

¹ <https://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages/Homelessness>

households struggling with high housing costs to remain stably housed long term. Providers discussed the cycle of poverty that is exacerbated for households who experience housing instability.²

This approach is the polar opposite to that taken by HB 2430. The Kansas legislature won't do the things that would address homelessness and other manifestations of poverty: expand Medicare, increase the minimum wage, support affordable childcare, address our affordable housing crisis, or support a principled homelessness to housing program. Instead, it pursues punitive and criminalizing measures like this one.

Criminalizing encampments, or punishing municipalities for not doing so, is not a homelessness policy – it will not give one family a home. Treating homelessness as a criminal issue only serves to move it into the shadows, forcing people to double up with family or friends or even sleep in their cars.

We know the best way to move people from homelessness to housing is through affordable housing and meaningful transition supports. We call on this committee, and this legislature, to do what it would take to help people out of homelessness, not to punish them, or the people who care for them, for their poverty. I urge this committee to vote down HB 2430.

Thank you.

² https://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/05-04-2017_Faith-Based.pdf