

Rep. Francis Awekamp, Chair

Rep. Leah Howell, Vice Chair

Rep. Heather Meyer – Ranking Minority Member

HB2430

Thursday, March 2, 2023

My name is Rachel Erpelding. I am the Executive Director of Kim Wilson Housing, Inc. Kim Wilson Housing, Inc. (KWH) was created within the Wyandot Behavioral Health Network family of non-profit, social service organizations specifically to provide wrap around services beneficial to people with a history of homelessness, zero to low income and special housing needs within the housing system, targeting those individuals/families for whom traditional market rate rental market is out of reach and unattainable.

I am testifying in opposition of HB 2430.

Homelessness in Wyandotte County, as in the rest of the country is a growing and complex problem with no easy solutions. It is easy to say that someone lost a job, or used drugs and couldn't maintain a home but there is more to this issue; vulnerability created by disabilities, poverty, history of disenfranchisement, lack of affordable housing, etc.. With so many causes, the solutions must be varied and broad in scope. For example, we have seen an increase in Wyandotte County in families and youth aging out of foster care entering homelessness for the first time and the appropriate intervention for this family is different than someone who was hospitalized for several months for diabetes and lost their home due to non-payment of rent. .

As a housing provider in Wyandotte County, we have seen what works to resolve homelessness and have seen very vulnerable people be successful and live meaningful lives in their communities. Success requires available, affordable, and safe housing along with services to support an individual in that housing, a model of housing intervention called Supportive Housing. Our community and other communities in the state need investment in these strategies to reduce homelessness, not criminalization that makes accessing housing more difficult.

Supportive housing is a highly effective strategy that combines a housing subsidy with intensive services to help people struggling with chronic conditions maintain stable housing and achieve improved health outcomes. Services, combined with affordable housing, can provide the assistance necessary to maintain a home and live a healthier life.

Evidence demonstrates that people are most successful when supportive services are offered along with housing subsidy to stabilize, learn, and improve daily living skills, manage symptoms of mental illness and substance use, connect to community, and build support systems that will increase permanency in housing.

Those services offered must be voluntary. Requiring treatment decreases autonomy and self-efficacy, which is the basis for success in recovery. For most people experiencing homelessness, whose daily concern is where they can lay their head without being assaulted or victimized at night, thinking into the future is extremely difficult. It's hard to think about an appointment for admission to substance use or mental health treatment that is 2 weeks away when you cannot think past surviving the night. Homelessness is traumatizing, it continues to affect people once they are housed and long into the future and the actions promoted by this bill create further trauma to someone who truly does not choose this lifestyle.

Struggling with mental illness makes this future planning process impossible. People with severe mental illness are more likely than others to be institutionalized in psychiatric facilities or prisons and this bill promotes continued use of this costly intervention. Osawatomie State Hospital has long wait lists and is often at capacity, this bill would increase the number of people requiring admission, especially given that Wyandotte County does not have an emergency shelter option to move people off the streets.

Several studies show that supportive housing successfully interrupts the cycle of homelessness and institutionalization that many people with mental illness experience. One study by Culhane, Metraux, and Hadley in New York found that “individuals placed in supportive housing spent, on average, 115 fewer days per person in homeless shelters, 75 fewer days in state-run psychiatric hospitals, and almost eight fewer days in prison or jails” compared to a similar group without supportive housing.

Another study found that after release from prison, those people placed in supportive housing were 43 percent less likely to be rearrested on misdemeanor charges than those who were not in supportive housing. House Bill 2430 would promote recidivism and result in costly law enforcement services and jail bed time for the community.

This bill directs funds to policing and arrest people experiencing homelessness and away from critical services and housing that has proven as one of the most effective methods of resolving homelessness. It further traumatizes people experiencing homelessness, some of whom have no previous criminal history. It is simply inhumane and invalidates the costly human experience of homelessness.

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