



January 13, 2021

Presentation for House Children and Seniors

Chairwoman Concannon and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share the mission and priorities of our organization with you. Kansas Action for Children aims to make our state the best place to raise – and be – a child. We were founded four decades ago by the Junior League of Topeka, Junior League of Wichita, Junior League of Johnson & Wyandotte Counties, and the Kansas Children's Service League as an independent voice in the state for Kansas children. That independence is important: We don't accept funding from the state or federal government because we value our ability to speak freely and clearly about the needs of Kansas children. We are nonprofit and nonpartisan, because the needs of our state's smallest residents cross party lines and ideologies.

KAC shapes state and federal policies that improve health, education, and financial outcomes for young children and the adults who care for them, especially those living in poverty. We prioritize policies that help kids and families meet their basic needs. We pursue policies that increase the quality, accessibility, and affordability of early education, while also strengthening the early childhood workforce.

Through the years, we have tackled issues including child care safety, foster care, car seat safety, and teen pregnancy. We've worked with legislators to protect the Children's Initiatives Fund, which supports early childhood programs. We also supported changes to state tax policy, emphasizing that we couldn't make the investments Kansas families need until the state's finances were in order.

But all of that is just a prologue to our work now. After decades of research, scientists have shown that the experiences children have early in life shape their brain architecture. The environments in which they have those experiences likewise play a crucial role. No element can be ignored: good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, security and safety, and opportunities for early learning are all essential.

For the past several months, the COVID-19 pandemic has put all these elements at risk, especially for Kansas children and families of color, those living in poverty, and frontline workers. While the effects of the pandemic have ranged widely, for this committee I will focus on an industry that has been hit particularly hard: child care.

Before COVID-19 spread across our state, the child care industry was already in a tenuous position. Many Kansas families did not have access to high-quality child care, either because there were too few slots available, or the price tag on such care was too high. At the same time, the child care workforce has been aging, pay remains low and stagnant, and few professionals are entering the field. With the onset of the pandemic, many child care providers were forced to close at least temporarily. Those who have been able to remain open or reopen face reduced enrollment, lower revenue, and increased operating costs.

To address these issues, Kansas Action for Children is pursuing policies that support both parents and providers during this difficult time, while recognizing that long-term structural improvements must be made. In the short term, we urge the Legislature to allocate the funds required to draw down all available federal dollars for child care. Currently, Kansas leaves \$3 million federal dollars on the table each year. This is money that could be used to increase access to child care and improvements to the quality of care. Additionally, we will seek an expansion of the employer tax credit for child care to help businesses offset the cost of providing child care as a benefit to employees.

We stand ready to help you as you dig into these policy options. As the state KIDS COUNT organization, we believe in connecting the data to effective and meaningful policies to help kids and their families thrive and have information available for every single county in the state. Please reach out to me or other members of the KAC team if we can be of help to you.

Sincerely,

Mitch Rucker
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