

Kansas becomes first state to let teens in foster care choose legal guardian, family



BY JENNA BARACKMAN **KC STAR**

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Kansas teens aging out of the state's foster care system are now able to choose a primary legal guardian whom they trust to represent them best, giving them another option when transitioning to independent living.

Previously, teenagers aging out of the foster system had three pathways for permanency, or a term for a legally recognized family: adoption, reunification with their biological family, or the appointment of a custodial parent.

The measure – called the Support, Opportunity, Unity, and Legal permanency, or SOUL – adds a fourth pathway. It allows teenagers 16 and older to have a say in who should raise them as they enter adulthood – while keeping without severing legal ties to their biological families.

Teens can choose one or a group of people they trust to care for them.

Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly signed the bill into law earlier this month making Kansas the first state to offer that choice to teens aging out of foster care.

She said that while the three options already available in Kansas work for many youths, those with “lived experience” emphasized the need for the policy.

“It is a tool that we can use to ensure Kansas foster children aging out of the system grow into the next phase of their life, finish their education, settle into jobs, and become contributing members of their community,” Kelly, a Democrat, said.

The policy had broad bipartisan support, passing unanimously in the Senate and 112-8 in the House.

Nationally, more than 23,000 children age out of the U.S. foster care system every year, 20% of whom will be homeless and left without support, according to the National Foster Youth Institute. The organization advocates for changes to the foster care system.

The Kansas Department of Children and Family Services reported that 517 teenagers were preparing to age out of the foster system where adoption, reunification, and appointed guardianship were ruled out. They estimated that 25% of teens coming out of foster care will utilize the new fourth pathway.

Proponents say this new pathway will give teens a safety net and help avoid negative outcomes from aging out of the system, such as homelessness, poor education, and increased rates of incarceration.

Marquan Teetz, a Wichita foster care activist, was one of those teens who would have utilized the option and testified in favor of the bill earlier this session. His great-aunt took care of him and his brother until Teetz was forced to separate from his aunt to avoid reentry into the system. This resulted in a “painful separation” from his brother and homelessness into adulthood.

“Had SOUL Family been available, it could have provided a crucial support system for my aunt and me,” he said. “The program’s emphasis on supporting kinship care could have allowed us to remain together.

“Instead of facing the daunting prospect of going it alone, the presence of SOUL Family support would have empowered us to overcome obstacles and make informed decisions about our future,” he said.

Rachel Marsh, the CEO of the Children’s Alliance of Kansas, a non-profit organization that provides resources for children and families in difficult situations, said the SOUL option centers children. She said it will help these teens build strong familial relationships and ensure their stability after foster care.

“Think of young people aging out of foster care in Kansas and having no one to call and ask how you boil an egg or wash a wool sweater from Goodwill or navigate relationship changes,” Marsh said.

“That helps me to understand how important it is to create permanent, legal relationships outlined in (the law). None of us ever outgrow the need for a family,” she said.

Read more at: <https://www.kansascity.com/news/politics-government/article288596276.ht...>

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