

STATE GOVERNMENT

5,600 Kansas children are in foster care. Redefining neglect could keep more families together

Too many children are swept up in the foster care system, advocates say. A proposal in the Legislature could start to address that problem.



By [Blaise Mesa](#) March 19, 2025

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The bill isn't expected to pass this year but could come around next year. Credit: Blaise Mesa / The Beacon

There are about 5,600 children and teens in the Kansas foster care system. That number is higher than nearby states because there are too many reasons a child could enter foster care in Kansas.

“I’ve heard it too many times to deny it,” said Rep. Jarrod Ousley, a Merriam Democrat. “I’ve heard too many firsthand and secondhand stories of removals that shouldn’t have happened.”

TAKEAWAYS

For example, Connecticut has 3,100 children in foster care even though the state has over 40,000 more people under 19 than Kansas. Arkansas has nearly the same number of young people as Kansas, yet it only has about 3,500 foster kids.

Kansas lawmakers are trying to fix this problem by redefining what neglect is for the foster care system. The new definition is a crucial first step in reducing the overburdened system, lawmakers, lobbyists and the state foster care agency say.

Hundreds of foster care cases could change

The proposal clarifies that poverty is not a reason to remove children from a home.

It says neglect is when parents or guardians unreasonably fail to provide for a child or outright refuse to do so. This definition is trying to address gray areas in law. Let’s say there’s no food in the fridge for the child to eat. The child shouldn’t starve, but it would only constitute neglect if the parents refuse to buy food or spend their last \$20 on cigarettes, for example.

The bill also clarifies that parents with mental health issues, poor housing or nonfelony **drug crimes** without harm are not reason alone to remove a child. Neither are:

- Community or family poverty.
- Isolation.
- The age of the parent.
- Crowded housing.
- Disability or special needs of the parent or child.
- The child skipping school.

It isn’t clear how many fewer foster care cases that would mean a year. Last fiscal year, 218 children entered foster care because their parents had alcohol or drug abuse problems. Another 32 entered the system because of truancy and four because of inadequate housing.

KCUR reported in 2023 that 57 Kansas children were put in foster care because their special needs were more than the family could manage.

But that data isn't clear enough to definitively say that these children would have stayed at home. The Kansas Department for Children and Families data says these were the primary removal reasons. There could have been other issues that led to removal but the parent's drug abuse could have been the most significant one.

That's why advocates who champion this bill are hesitant to say how much this will help.

Brenna Visocky, Just Campaign director at Kansas Appleseed, said she'll need to see the bill work in practice before she'll know its full impact. It is important, though, she said.

"It's the first step in what I would say is a culture shift in the way we think about the foster care system and how we allocate resources," she said.

The foster care system will be focused on helping families and providing resources rather than ripping kids away from families, which is traumatic in and of itself, Visocky said.

"Even if one kid gets to stay at home and stay safe with their family and receive those resources in the home, that's progress," she said, "that's worth it."

Just one part of the solution

There's bipartisan agreement that fewer foster children is good.

Fewer foster children means fewer taxpayer dollars spent on treatment and fewer children going through traumatic experiences, and it frees up caseworkers to be better at their jobs.

One caseworker **told auditors** reviewing the foster care system that "it is hard to give the attention that each case needs when you have (a number of cases higher than the limits) ... It is hard to give each the attention that they deserve."

And Kansas social workers have high caseloads.

Forty-four percent of caseworkers at foster care agency TFI have more than 30 children on their caseload. That number of caseworkers with more than 30 children is 42% at St. Francis Ministries.

The bill passed out of a House committee with bipartisan support because Republicans and Democrats agree this is important. But some are frustrated the bill is only proposing language

changes to reduce the numbers of foster kids. Advocates, social workers and lawmakers said investing in prevention services is another key part of the puzzle.

Officials with the Department for Children and Families said they are confident the current support systems can handle more referrals if this bill is passed.

Millions in federal assistance dollars are one major reason kids have avoided foster care in recent years. **A University of Kansas** study has also found that increasing food benefits can reduce foster care caseloads up to 14%.

Rep. Cyndi Howerton, a Wichita Republican, said she heard this concern while talking to experts about the bill. She doesn't disagree that more investment in programs can reduce the number of foster kids, but she doesn't want to lose sight of this bill.

Howerton said she wants prevention services to become more of the standard than removal. She said this bill is the first step in making significant change.

What is going on with the bill?

The bill won't have time this year to pass through the Senate committee process. That doesn't stop this proposal from coming back next year.

Howerton said the bill is extremely technical, which has required meeting time to debate each proposed word change. But she does see support in the Senate whenever this bill advances to that chamber.

Tanya Keys, deputy secretary for the Department for Children and Families, said DCF requested that this change be passed. It's about strengthening the protections for families to avoid unnecessary and traumatic removals.

She's happy with how the bill was worded when it passed out of the House committee.

"This is a great start, and it would really be the framework upon (which) other things could be built," Keys said. "(We want) to make sure that prevention is offered before a child has a need to enter foster care."

