

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

S.B.276

March 15, 2022

House Committee on Children and Seniors

Representative Susan Concannon, Chair, and Committee Members:

My name is Susan Haller Tabor. I wish to offer testimony in favor of SB-276. This bill's adoption would make it illegal for child placement or custody decisions to be made on the basis of blindness alone, and where blindness is felt to be a contributing factor, then supportive parenting services must be offered. This bill was passed unanimously by the state Senate on March 8, 2022.

I am a retired social worker, having practiced as a licensed clinical social worker for over forty years. If this piece of legislation had been on the books early in my practice, perhaps a legally blind young woman who was my client, and I would have had a different experience with the social service delivery system.

My first job after graduate school was as a psychotherapist at the Sedgwick County Department of Mental Health in Wichita. One of the very first cases assigned to me was that of a young legally blind mother whose child had been repeatedly removed from her custody due to concerns that her child was being neglected. The child protective service worker was ready for severance. I was not.

The child protection worker and I had different ideas about the case. I felt that the work with the client had been fragmented with little continuity and opportunity to fully and objectively assess her situation. The material I had received provided me with information concerning discussions with family members and neighbors, but not many with the mother of the child herself.

During our first discussion the child protective service worker said to me: "Can you guarantee me 100 percent that we will not have to go in and remove that child from her mother again?"

My answer was, and still is: "I can not make that kind of guarantee about anyone. None of us knows what will happen to us during our lifetime. I do not have a crystal ball."

To make a long story short, the severance was requested and the judge chose to allow the mother to have a good course of therapy first. After several months, factors that were problems for this mother were identified and a plan was put in place to remedy them, and the child was returned to her mother's custody.

The skill deficits experienced by this young mother had nothing to do with her visual impairment, though one would not know this when examining the case before her mental health issues were addressed. The mother herself had experienced a difficult life before becoming a teenage mother. She responded well to therapy and to getting the priorities of her life organized and strategies put in place to help her to honor her life's priorities.

I shudder whenever I think of this case. This young woman nearly lost her child, and unnecessarily, due to problems with and assumptions made in the delivery of investigation and child protective services.

Placement of this legislation into the statute books and policy manuals of service providers would help more objectively guide their case planning and interventions, thereby leading to a more objective process of assessment and service delivery, and one that directly targets the actual problems, not those created by fear and/or unconscious bias.

I thank you for hearing my testimony, and am happy to entertain questions if you have any.

Susan E. Haller Tabor, M.S.W., Retired,

1234 Tennessee St.

Lawrence, Kansas 66044

Douglas County

House District 46