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Partners in America's Poverty Fighting Network

February 1, 2016

To: Senate Corrections and Juvenile Justice Committee
From: Gary Brunk
Re: Senate Bill 367

The Kansas Association of Community Action Programs supports enactment of Senate Bill 367.

The Kansas Association of Community Action Programs (KACAP) is the membership association of Community Action Agencies in Kansas that are working to create economic opportunity. Because six of the eight Community Action Agencies have multi-county service areas our work reaches across the state.

In order to reduce poverty a Community Action Agency works to better focus available local, state, private and federal resources to assist low-income individuals and families to acquire useful skills and knowledge, gain access to new opportunities and achieve economic self-sufficiency.

One of the significant barriers to self-sufficiency is a history of involvement in juvenile prisons. Compared to non-incarcerated peers, a young person who has been in prison is significantly less likely to finish high school and more likely to be incarcerated as an adult. Less education, in turn, results in greater difficulty finding and keeping a job and in lower pay if they do find a job.

Caseworkers at one of our member agencies asked adults they are working with about their experience in the juvenile justice system, and these were some of their comments:

"I struggled, [prison is] different, you don't take a chance, just try to blend in, afraid to study or even think about trying to get a high school diploma."

"Education was the least of my worries, [prison is] not a good place, my old man beat me but this was worse."

"I disconnected with school, it was difficult, I felt lost, not sure who to trust, family, friends, favorite teacher were gone."

KACAP Member Agencies and Board of Directors

Community Action, Inc.
East Central Kansas Economic Opportunity Corporation
Economic Opportunity Foundation
Harvest America Corporation

Mid-Kansas Community Action Program
Northeast Kansas Community Action Program
Southeast Kansas Community Action Program
Wichita Sedgwick County Community Action Partnership

“Couldn't get a chance to be myself, I felt beat down, school seemed useless, I remained tough, but I was sweating with fear.”

I think these comments illustrate how time spent in prison interrupts and sets back a young person's education. Once out of the juvenile system many have a difficult time continuing their education, with long-term negative consequences for their ability to find and keep employment.

I don't have the data to quantify the cost to the state's economy from lower productivity and earnings of formerly incarcerated youth, but I want to underscore that that cost comes on top of the \$53 million a year that we already spend on prisons and other out-of-home placements for juveniles, and on top of the cost to tax-payers when a formerly imprisoned juvenile returns to our already over-crowded prisons as an adult.

The vast majority of youth sent to out-of-home placement in Kansas – 80 percent – pose only a low or moderate risk. The research shows that for those youth out-of-home placement increases the chances of recidivism and that, in contrast, local, family-based alternatives reduce future offenses and are more cost-effective. For this 80 percent, long-term economic self-sufficiency will be more likely if we can keep them out of prison.

The Kansas Association of Community Action Programs believes that the impacts of Senate Bill 367 – the product of consensus recommendation from the legislators, judges, prosecution and defense attorneys, and other Kansas juvenile justice practitioners who were the members of the Juvenile Justice Workgroup - will include more families attaining economic self-sufficiency. We strongly support its enactment.