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January 28, 2016

Sen. Greg Smith
VIA E-MAIL
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Senator Smith:

I'm writing today to commend the Kansas Senate Corrections and Juvenile Justice Committee on taking up Senate Bill 367. I am the elected county prosecutor in Henderson County, Kentucky, and was a member of the Kentucky Unified Juvenile Code Task Force. Similar to the process the Kansas Juvenile Justice Workgroup has undertaken, our Task Force considered our state's data and engaged in a research-based process that brought together our state experts and practitioners in the area of juvenile justice. The result was Senate Bill 200 – legislation that increases public safety, strengthens communities and families, and improves outcomes, including reducing future offending by juveniles in our system.

Our Task Force found that Kentucky's secure facilities primarily housed lower-level offenders – youth who had been committed for misdemeanors or for violating the terms of community supervision. In addition, youth were staying longer in these facilities than they were a decade before. Based on these findings, our Task Force recommended that Kentucky focus its costliest sanctions on the most serious offenders by restricting the commitment of lower-level youth, expanding and strengthening evidence-based programs, authorizing a fiscal incentive program to help counties keep youth in local delinquency prevention programs, and establishing an oversight council to monitor the reforms. I now serve on the state Juvenile Justice Oversight Council, and have already begun to review data that shows we are starting to see success from diverting more youth from court and focusing out-of-home placement resources on more serious offenders.

In Henderson County, we have been engaged in juvenile justice reform for a number of years, and as the county's prosecutor I have been deeply involved in this process. For years, we were throwing the book at kids, and it just wasn't working. So after gathering stakeholders together, collecting data, and asking for help from anybody who would listen, we decided to put a heavy focus on early interventions—especially in the schools—to address troubling behaviors. By assessing the risk and needs of these youth very early, and then frontloading services to them, we've seen a nearly 70 percent decrease in referrals to court over the past three years.

I am thrilled that Kansas has taken steps to review data and address the issues in the state juvenile justice system and that you have developed legislation that will produce better outcomes for youth, families, and communities in your state.

I am sure that I speak for all of the juvenile justice stakeholders in Kentucky when I say that we would always be happy to share any assistance, advice, or lessons-learned that may help Kansas in this endeavor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven R. Gold". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "S" and a long, sweeping underline.

Steven R. Gold
Henderson County Attorney