

OTHER NEWS

Kansas foster children’s voices muted as court advocates take on hundreds of cases each

BY ANNA KAMINSKI
Kansas Reflector

TOPEKA — Kansas foster children rarely interact with their court-appointed advocates, and their voices have become muted, a statewide report said.

Chief Judge Amy Harth of the state’s sixth judicial district said the challenges facing Kansas children’s court-appointed advocates are “eerily similar” to the challenges reported 25 years ago. The last time a statewide report evaluating the court-appointed advocate system was conducted was in 2001.

At the root are caseload levels much higher than the national average, inadequate training and paltry compensation, Harth said at a Thursday hearing before the House child welfare committee.

The system is not working, an advisory committee found after an 18-month review of Kansas’ guardian ad litem, or child in need of care, system. In a 2025 report, the committee decided a comprehensive shift is needed to

ensure children receive high-quality legal representation.

Kansas has no universal cap on caseloads, and the majority of advocates who responded to a survey from the advisory committee handle volumes above national best practices. Those best practices recommend full-time advocates limit caseloads to 40-60 children and part-time to 20-30 children.

Twelve part-time advocates in Kansas reported handling between 125-305 cases each, the report said.

Excessive caseloads make it nearly impossible for advocates, who are attorneys, to build relationships with children and investigate each case, the report said.

Inadequate compensation for advocates exacerbates caseload issues, especially in Sedgwick and Shawnee counties, the report said.

From 2022-2024, Sedgwick County averaged 585 open cases per year and contracts with eight part-time advocates who took on more than five times the recommended 30-case limit

and were paid a \$44,400 annual salary, according to the report.

Shawnee County averaged 380 open cases, and to meet the county’s 30-case limit, it would have to contract with 13 part-time advocates. Instead, it contracts with five part-time advocates who are paid \$50,400 annually while taking on more than six times the recommended caseload limit.

Kerrie Lonard, the state child advocate, said advocates need to see decreased caseloads and increased competency and performance expectations, “so that we’re not having the same conversation in 2050.”

Each county has the discretion to create its own rules around compensation, training and caseloads for advocates. But the report concluded that the state’s current decentralized system without significant oversight cannot fix caseload, training and competency problems.

SHELTER

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Locations with warming shelters include:

East Garden Village, 4101 E. US Highway 50

Finney County Health Department, 919 Zerr Rd.

Finney County Law Enforcement Center, 304 N. Ninth St.

Finney County Public Library, 605 E. Walnut St.

Finney County Senior Center, 907 N. 10th St.

First Baptist Church, 1005 N. 11th St.

Garden City Administrative Center, 301 N. Eighth St.

Garden City Community College, 801 N. Campus Dr.

Garden City Recreation Commission, 310 N. Sixth St.

Georgia Matthews Elementary

School, 111 E. Johnson St.

Holcomb Baptist Church, 403 Emmanuel Dr.

Holcomb High School, 600 N. Jones Ave.

Horace Good Middle School, 1412 N. Main St.

Pierceville Federated Church, 203 E. Avenue A

Trinity Lutheran Church, 1010 N. Fleming St.

Word of Life Church, 3004 N. Third St.

COUNTY

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hills, steep drop-offs on the edge of the road, and heavy truck traffic,” she said. “Currently, trucks tend to drop wheels off the edge of the pavement and cross over the centerline as they navigate the curves.”

Between 2015 and 2025, there were 26 accidents on the highway, Phillips said. These resulted in one fatality, 10 personal injuries, and 14 instances of property damage only.

The 26th accident occurred after the agreement was originally presented to the Commission and is not included in the accident breakdown.

The county was awarded \$600,000 in federal funding for the project, which is slated for Federal Fiscal Year 2027.

Phillips said federal funds may cover a minimum of 90% of the eligible construction and construction engineering costs for the project.

Finney County is responsible for \$121,000, which breaks down to \$55,000 for preliminary engineering, \$10,000 for construction and \$56,000 for construction engineering, Phillips said.

The improvements to Old Highway 83 seek to enhance its safety by reducing pavement drop-offs, prolonging the life of the roadway and aiding drivers in maintaining their lane, thus preventing head-on collisions, Phillips said.

The improvements include the installation of centerline rumble strips, retroreflective centerline pavement markings on the paved roadway, construction of 18-inch aggregate shoulders, installation of curve warning signs with retroreflective strips and the flattening and widening of the side slope of the ditches along the edge of the pavement.

CW Harper, acting Finney County Engineer with Kirkham Michael, said the flattening and widening of the fore slopes will help with the run-off-the-road crashes on Old Highway 83, which make up a lot of the crashes on the roadway as the improved aggregate should make it easier for people to recover from running off the road.

“Lots of times, what we see is they’ll drop a wheel off and either that’ll pull them on off the side of the road in that direction or they’ll overcorrect and end up going across the road and hopefully don’t pass oncoming traffic that

they overcorrect into,” he said.

The centerline rumble strips should help drivers determine where they are on the roadway, particularly during inclement weather.

“They do kind of drive right down the middle of the road, especially in some of those areas you can’t see,” he said. “Hopefully with rumble strips we’d at least give them the audible little indication that they’re crossing the road and try to stay on your side of the road.”

Harper drove on Old Highway 83 during the snowstorm on Jan. 16, and said it was kind of handy, as he could see all the track of the trucks coming down the middle of the road over the tops of the hills and curves.

The improvements will be beneficial as traffic is picking up out there, Harper said.

“We did our traffic counts, and if we basically ignore Friday’s snow day, the weekday traffic was about 700 vehicles a day, and on the north end and the south end was about 500 vehicles a day,” he said. “The KDOT traffic counts were around 450 for that ... they were [probably] taking down towards US 83 on the south end.”

Commissioner Kevin Bascue said

he opposes the expense, as he’d rather see it used on other roadways such as Railroad Avenue between Holcomb and Garden City.

Commissioner Vicki Germann was in favor of accepting the agreement, she said it’s the responsibility of the Commission to provide for the safety of the county’s residents on its roads.

“I think if we choose to not spend the money, which is a small portion of what it’s going to cost, I think that may reflect poorly on our county and our community and it may inhibit the ability to get other grants in the future,” she said. “I really feel like this is something we probably should take seriously and vote in favor of.”

Commissioner Gerry Schultz said the project is affordable, and the local taxpayers are funding 18.09% of the project.

“We can ill afford not to have grants in the future, and the cost to the taxpayer today is below 20%,” he said. “I think it’s something that we should keep in mind, not just for us today in 2026, but rather the future grants that are going to be coming our way unless there’s a complete failure of the federal administration to grant highway project.”

CITY

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designates the area as low-density residential, which includes single-family detached, townhomes and duplexes, so the proposed development and rezoning conform to the plan if approved, Thompson said.

The NDS staff recommended approval of the rezoning request, whereas the Planning Commission recommended the Commission deny the rezoning request.

Darla Daniels, a resident who lives near the proposed development, spoke at the meeting on Tuesday, voicing her desire for the rezoning request to be denied.

Daniels said she’s concerned about what the townhomes would look like, what materials will be used as well as how close the buildings will be and if there will be any greenspace.

“We do need housing, but we want it to be nice,” she said. “Continue to be a nice, nice neighborhood.”

Barbara Larson also spoke to the Commission on Tuesday, voicing her opposition to the rezoning request.

“This is my third time up here

fighting this,” she said. “Let’s not build these smashed up, high rise condominiums.”

Commissioner Tom Nguyen said it’s clear that the residents value and are protective of their neighborhood, especially as the development is in their backyard, they’ll have to see it every day and it will have an impact on their taxes, but he also recognizes that the prior promise of higher end homes has changed, and community needs homes.

“It’s easier for me to see something built there than nothing built there at all,” he said.

Thompson said from what he can tell from conversations with the developer, they decided to pursue townhomes as they were having a hard time selling the larger, single-family lots.

“They believe that the market may be more towards the smaller duplexes that a person owns,” he said. “It’s easier for them to maintain over time, it generally, the cost is a little bit cheaper ... it’s more towards this style of home and lot for somebody to purchase rather than a large, single-family lot.”

The rezoning would still allow for

single-family homes to be built on the outskirts lots of the development, Thompson said.

“The intention is for a mixed neighborhood, much like it is surrounding this property,” he said.

Without any design standards adopted by the city, there’s no way for anyone to know what the townhomes will look like, Thompson said. They could all look the same, they could all be different.

“We don’t have those design standards that the city could enforce,” he said. “We leave those to private entities like a homeowner’s association, to enforce those.”

Nguyen said the situation is a bit of a predicament in the sense of local philosophy.

“The question also rises, it makes the question of how much control should the local government, the city, have over developers in exactly what should be built and exactly the influences that arises to nearby property owners?” he said.

It also brings problems to the surface of if there’s an overstep of local government when it comes to saying if a developer cannot build x, y and z when the intent is to just build homes, Nguyen said.

Obituaries

RON SCHULTZ

Ron Schultz, age 82, of Ulysses, KS passed away on January 20, 2026, at Western Prairie Senior Living, in Ulysses, KS. A Celebration of Life will be held on March 14, 2026 at 2:00 PM at Reynolds-Love Funeral Home, 106 W 8th St, Lexington, NE 68850. Memorials may be given to the Furever Friends in care of Garnand Funeral Home, 405 W. Grant Ave., Ulysses, Kansas 67880. Condolences may be posted at www.garnandfuneralhomes.com.

MATT TULL

Matt Christopher Tull, 52, died on Wednesday, January 21, 2026, at his home in Garden City, Kansas. A Vigil Service and Rosary will be held at 7:00 PM on Tuesday, January 27, 2026, at St Dominic’s Catholic Church in Garden City. Mass of Christian Burial will be held at 10:30 AM on Wednesday, January 28, 2026, also at St. Dominic’s Catholic Church with Fr. Ben Green as Celebrant. Burial will follow at Valley View Cemetery in Garden City. Visitation hours will be held from Noon to 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday at Garnand Funeral Home in Garden City. The family suggests memorials to either St. Mary’s Catholic School Tuition Scholarship Fund or to St. Dominic’s Catholic School Tuition Scholarship Fund, both in care of Garnand Funeral Home, 412 N. 7th St., Garden City, Kansas 67846. Condolences may be given at garnandfuneralhomes.com.

CLOSURES

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competition for Saturday, Jan. 24, due to the inclement weather that is expected that day.

The competition has been rescheduled to Saturday, Feb. 14, at the GCHS.

Garden City High School and Buff Robotics will host the largest VexIQ robotics competition in Kansas history. This is the fifth consecutive year that the school has hosted the largest robotics competition in Kansas. This year, there will be 82 elementary and middle school teams from across the state that will participate in the event.

SCHOOLS

USD 457, USD 363 and Garden City Community College, as well as a majority of school districts in southwest Kansas, canceled classes on Friday due to the inclement weather.