

**Testimony in Support of House Bill 2128
Regarding the Governor's Domestic Violence Fatality Review Board**

Presented to the House Judiciary Committee
By Victim Services Director Audrey Cress

February 7, 2017

Chairman Finch and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of HB 2128.

This legislation provides the Governor's Domestic Violence Fatality Review Board (DVFRB) the ability to go into closed or executive meeting when conducting case reviews.

The DVFRB was established on October 11, 2004 by Executive Order 04-11 in order to recommend improvements to prevent future fatalities and determine if adequate systems and training are in place for those who respond to domestic violence crimes.

The DVFRB examines domestic violence homicides with two principal goals:

- 1) To continue informing the public about the insidious nature of domestic violence and motivating the public to find solutions to end domestic violence; and
- 2) To identify systemic change within all the organizations and agencies that work with domestic violence victims, offenders, and families to learn new ways of reducing the number of fatalities by better identification of risk factors and improvements in the coordination of services that our State provides.

In the first ten years of service to the State of Kansas, the DVFRB reviewed 54 domestic violence homicides, providing recommendations for future fatality prevention. Each of these case reviews involve gathering all relevant information available, from courts, law enforcement, medical/mental health services, child and family services, corrections, etc. Interviews are also conducted with surviving family members, the offender, and the offender's family, if they are interested in sharing their experiences. All of this information is distilled and redacted by the DVFRB Analyst, who then presents the information to the Board.

By nature of redacting and sanitizing the information to protect the confidentiality of those involved, some details and impact are lost. Redacting also takes a significant amount of time and energy by the Analyst, which could be utilized in different ways if the Board was able to go into closed session. Additionally, the Board seeks to honor victims who have lost their lives to homicide. Removing a victim's name, identity, and humanity feels disrespectful to the individual we are seeking to honor.

Closed session would allow the Board to speak openly, to access unredacted information, and to review a case in all of its authentic detail, leading to more informed recommendations. Closed session would also continue to protect the confidentiality of this sensitive information.

The work of the DVFRB is important to the State of Kansas. The recommendations provided by the Board have the potential to significantly impact rates of domestic violence in Kansas. The Board is made up of a multidisciplinary group of professionals with incredible experience in responding to domestic violence in various systems. These unique perspectives, combined with full, unredacted case information, allow the Board to make impactful recommendations to prevent further domestic violence homicides in Kansas.

In my role as Director of Victim Services for the Kansas Department of Corrections, I have reviewed recommendations by the Board and implemented several important changes to our domestic violence response. I firmly believe these changes have significantly reduced the impact of domestic violence in our system and I seek to continue utilizing the expertise of the Board to identify additional opportunities to better address this important issue.

Allowing the Board to go into closed session honors victims' confidentiality, provides the opportunity for the Board to review unredacted information, and leads to more informed recommendations. Additionally, the time saved by preventing the DVFRB Analyst from having to redact information would lead to an increase in cases reviewed by the DVFRB. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Audrey Cress', written in a cursive style.

Audrey Cress, Director of Victim Services
Kansas Department of Corrections
Co-Chair, Governor's Domestic Violence Fatality Review Board