

Douglas County 2024 Legislative Statement

Douglas County Initiatives

In the last five years, Douglas County has heavily invested in expanding access to behavioral health services, alternatives to incarceration, and human services. These investments have been driven by the desires of our constituents to see better human and financial outcomes for local systems of care.

This past year Douglas County, along with our community partners met an important milestone in opening the Treatment and Recovery Center (TRC). The 24/7 resource, which is funded locally by a quarter-cent sales tax, as well as state and federal funding, has served more than 500 people in the last six months. This success is the result of years of planning with our state and local partners, and a commitment from Douglas County taxpayers to support this vital community resource.

Looking ahead to the next five years it is clear that addressing and adapting to climate impacts will be an important focus for Douglas County. In the last year, Douglas County has been working with public and private partners to develop a Climate Action and Adaptation Plan that aims to prepare our community for the effects of climate impacts and build resilience in the face of extreme weather and other natural disasters. At the same time, the pressure to craft land use regulations related to the development of large and small-scale solar and wind energy utilities has presented new challenges to approaching sustainability as a community. Balancing the interests of landowners who both oppose and support these projects presents challenges to our elected and appointed leaders and professional staff who are working to develop regulations and land use codes that can strike the right balance.

While Douglas County is proud of the work we have accomplished and are engaged in today, many of our citizens are feeling significant pressure due to the growing cost of living expenses and the role that local property taxes play in that. To respond to these concerns Douglas County's FY 2024 budget lowered the mill rate by two mills, for a total of three mills over the last two years. The County Commission will continue to evaluate opportunities to maintain a budget that sustains the vital services that many of our most vulnerable community members rely on, while keeping the cost of living in Douglas County within reason for our seniors and households on a fixed income. Without a strong partnership from our state agencies and programs, this will be difficult to achieve. Douglas County looks forward to cooperating and collaborating with the legislature and other elected and appointed leaders to achieve our goals together.

Douglas County Legislative Priorities

- **Competency Restoration & Community Interventions** – Douglas County is appreciative of the legislature's actions in the 2023 session to reimburse counties for the costs associated with involuntary holds for individuals awaiting competency restoration. The County has been encouraged by efforts in the last year to assist county jails and community service providers to develop community-based

competency restoration services, however; a crucial component of the success of these services is the ability to consistently provide the most efficacious medications for individuals to be restored to competency. In many cases, these are long-acting injectable psychotropic medications. We would encourage the legislature to consider providing more robust and targeted funding to counties and community mental health centers to ensure the provision of necessary medications when competency restoration services are provided locally. Additional considerations of funding to expand opportunities for in-patient addiction services is a key focus for Douglas County as our community struggles to respond to the needs of a growing population of individuals that routinely utilize costly emergency services and present threats to public safety.

- **Housing** – In response to a national and local affordable housing crisis Douglas County, the City of Lawrence and our community partners have developed a short- and long-term strategic plan to address the needs of our most vulnerable community members. This plan puts significant emphasis on utilization of public and private funding for the development of affordable and supportive housing over the next five to ten years. Additional housing assets combined with improvements to our systems of care that work to prevent homelessness, stabilize and support our vulnerable households will continue to be a primary focus, while advocating for necessary policy changes both locally and statewide. We support counties’ home rule authority to address the housing needs of our community through all available methods, including but not limited to:
 - inclusionary zoning
 - landlord incentives
 - tenant right to counsel
 - reforming tenant-landlord to extend the time period for eviction proceedings
 - sources of income and other discrimination prevention measures
 - expanded funding to provide housing navigation and stability case management services.
- **Land Use** – In an effort to conserve vital natural resources and open spaces, Douglas County encourages the legislature to expand the abilities of local governments to work with interested landowners to incentivize permanently preserve key parcels of land as open space and agricultural production. Solutions that offer state income tax credits, local tax abatement programs, or developments of a state or local land trust would be of great benefit to local open space and rural preservation initiatives. Providing new tools to local governments related to open space will be vital to protect our water supply and natural habitat, promote agricultural production and soil conservation. Providing local governments with options such as these could lead to the conservation of countless valuable lands. Lands may include future parks, historic and cultural sites throughout Kansas.
- **Infrastructure** – The County and its municipal partners continue to evaluate opportunities to benefit from new opportunities to invest in our local and regional infrastructure. This includes improvements to our transportation networks, replacement and repair of bridges, improvements to aging water infrastructure, ensuring all Douglas County residents have access to reliable, high-speed internet and

promoting resilient infrastructure systems to mitigate the impacts of extreme weather and cyber-attacks. Additionally, Douglas County supports the use of these funds to continue the planned expansion of the South Lawrence Traffic way (SLT) at the Lecompton K-10 interchange and transportation improvements on K-10 west of Johnson County to meet the increased traffic demands to support the Panasonic battery production facility and other economic development projects.

Douglas County and its municipal partners continue to invest in our local and regional infrastructure to meet increasing demands. Current projects are improving road safety, increasing capacity, replacing deficient bridges and improving pedestrian access. The county and the City of Lawrence are investing in improvements related to ongoing expansion of K-10 Highway. Future traffic from the Astra Enterprise Park is anticipated to be a specific concern in and around the City of Eudora. Douglas County encourages the state to continue local funding programs for bridge replacements, road improvements, pedestrian access, safety studies and long-range plans to support this work. The county also supports planned improvements to state highways in our community, including expansion of the South Lawrence Trafficway west of Highway 59, expansion of K-10 east of Eudora, and widening of Highway 56 west of Baldwin City.

- **Climate Action and Adaptation** – As Douglas County expects to experience more extreme weather in the future, our ability to be resilient and prepared throughout our community systems requires collaborative strategies with public and private stakeholders, as well as local, state and federal agencies. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) provided historic investments in transportation, energy, and water resources that stand to benefit Douglas County’s efforts to meet community priorities, account for assets and vulnerabilities, implement short and long-term policies and programs to respond to the realities of climate change. The County strongly supports state efforts to accelerate the utilization of BIL funds through the Build Kansas Fund, which will provide necessary matching funds to local efforts to strengthen the ability to plan for and mitigate the impacts of climate change now and in the future. Douglas County has identified the following strategies as priorities for regional and state collaborative policy solutions that acknowledge and respond to increased risks due to climate change:
 - Support local and regional collaborations that advance and accelerate the decarbonization of the grid and oppose any new restrictions or qualifications detrimental to renewables.
 - Allow local governments to maintain regulatory authority over utility-scale renewable energy generation projects within their communities.
 - Enable local energy programs that reduce overall energy demand; increase energy efficiency in buildings and reduce costs; incentivize renewable residential and commercial distributed energy generation; facilitate community-owned solar generation.
 - Increase electric vehicle charging connectivity across the state.

- Strengthen floodplain protections and deter development in the 500-year floodplain for the safety of citizens and property and to sustain the ecosystem services of flood management they provide.

Douglas County supports and would like to acknowledge these issues:

Preparing for Panasonic. Douglas County supports a coordinated regional strategy with cities in Douglas, Leavenworth, and Johnson counties to meet the housing, transportation, childcare, and education needs for the 8,000 new jobs that will be created as a result of the Panasonic battery factory in Desoto. Douglas County has made significant investments in affordable, quality childcare to support our current and future workforce through the Douglas County Early Childhood Community Center. This resource will need continued support and partnership from state agencies and businesses to meet the need.

KanCare Expansion. We support Medicaid Expansion, which would, bringing more federal dollars to Kansas and extending health care coverage to our lower-income residents. Kansas should also pursue policies that maximize all possible federal funding sources in the Medicaid system, in the American Rescue Plan Act, and the Infrastructure spending bill to ensure our federal tax dollars provide services and improvements to our community. Additionally, access to the Women Infants and Children (WIC) and SNAP programs should be expanded, including the increased Fruit and Vegetable Cash Value Benefit, not limited, to ensure our most vulnerable access to federal and state support our tax dollars fund. Douglas County also supports the implementation of the Ground Emergency Medical Transportation (GEMT) program, which is intended to provide a supplemental payment for uncompensated expenses incurred by public agencies when providing emergency medical transport to Medicaid beneficiaries.

Support for Peaslee Tech. The County recognizes the important role Peaslee Tech plays in providing a variety of technical programs to county residents and businesses. The need for a skilled workforce will be greater than ever. We support enabling legislation authorizing a countywide election to form a special district to provide stable and sustainable funding for Peaslee Tech.

Elections. Douglas County supports the current state statute calling for the appointment of an Election Commissioner only in counties with a population of 125,000 or more. Any future changes regarding lowering this threshold should be made in close consultation with local election officials as well as the Kansas Association of Counties.

Criminal Justice Reform. We support measures to reduce incarceration, improve the competency restoration process, increase funding for community-based services, eliminate the criminalization of poverty, and address racial inequities in the criminal justice system. We encourage the Legislature to allocate increased funding for the Kansas State Board of Indigents' Defense Service in order to reduce public defender turnover and caseloads while implementing a client-centered, holistic defense model. We also encourage the Legislature to take steps to eliminate the criminalization of poverty. Specifically, we support removing all driver's license reinstatement fees and eliminating

the ability to suspend licenses for unpaid court fees. Finally, the Legislature should eliminate mandatory jail sentences for three or more Driving While Suspended convictions.

Food Programs and Systems – Douglas County and its local Food Policy Council support the development and expansion of programs and policies that strengthen our local food system. In response to a rising number of kids and adults experiencing food insecurity. We support the creation and expansion of programs that allow food access for vulnerable populations. The past four years of the pandemic have highlighted the integral role of “essential workers” across all sectors. Essential workers in our food systems are those who grow, process, distribute, transport, and serve our food. Particularly farms, farmers, and farm workers who are the backbone of our food system.

Repeal SB 180. Douglas County opposes any laws that limit an individual's ability to access public spaces and utilize public services based on their gender identity.

Clarifying County Authority. We oppose any amendments to the Kansas Emergency Management Act that would limit the County’s home rule authority or ability to respond to emergencies efficiently, effectively, and in the best interest of its local citizens.

Community Corrections. Douglas County supports the Kansas Community Corrections Association (KCCA) request for additional State General Fund resources to increase community corrections grants to local community corrections agencies. Douglas County supports the review of unifying corrections field services as a single entity to determine the benefits and challenges. We support the current direction of allowing local communities a central role in unification. Any efforts at consolidation should be based on local control.

KPERS and KPF. Douglas County supports the inclusion of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis in all workers’ compensation claims which may permit medical retirement for our law enforcement and first responders. We support the assessment of possible changes to KPERS Tier 3 in order to provide a more competitive retirement option for local, school, and state employees.

Seniors and Vulnerable Adults. We support measures to expand vital safety net services for low-income, disabled or medically compromised community members who are age sixty and older. Ensuring access to home-based, preventive care for seniors and disabled adults that prevents overutilization and inappropriate use of emergency services should be prioritized for future considerations of funding and program eligibility, including but not limited to accessible and affordable supportive housing. Additionally, we support efforts that seek to strengthen the senior care workforce, including training and workforce development for certified nurse aids, higher reimbursement rates, and workforce incentives to better bolster the senior care workforce.

Spending and Taxing Lids. We support efforts to repeal the statutory requirement that the Legislature must approve all county sales tax decisions. We continue to strenuously oppose any constitutional or statutory amendment to impose additional spending or taxing limitations on county government. Additionally, Douglas County is opposed to any taxation limitations imposed through a cap on appraisals.

Home Rule. We support constitutional home rule for counties and oppose any additional erosion of existing statutory home rule authority. We support counties using their current home rule powers when applicable rather than seeking specific legislative remedies.

Student Survey Bill. The County supports state policy that increases participation in student surveys such as the Kansas Communities That Care Survey (KCTC). The KCTC provides the state and its prevention partners valuable data to monitor trends and inform decision-making about programs, policies, and best practices to improve youth health outcomes. Surveys such as the KCTC are crucial for communities accessing data and outcomes for grants and research that promotes and supports behavioral health prevention work, especially among our youth.