

Statement of Sarah LaFrenz

Good afternoon. My name is Sarah LaFrenz, and I'm from Topeka, Kansas. I'm here today as a private Kansas citizen, and am not here as an agent or representative of any agency or agency policies.

Thank you for the time and the opportunity to talk to you about shortsighted tax plans that benefit the wealthy and corporations, but come at a great cost to everyone else. When you drain the public coffers for unneeded tax giveaways to the rich, there is not much left for essential public services that benefit all citizens.

What happened in Kansas is a deeply personal story for me—because every single person I know in Kansas has been affected in some way by this tax experiment. As a mom of three, a state employee in Kansas since 2005, and a Kansas Organization of State Employees union steward, I have seen firsthand what this experiment has done to the people of Kansas.

Gov. Sam Brownback was elected in November 2009 on a platform of trickle-down economics, shrinking government and increasing efficiency. That translated into slashing the tax revenue that our state agencies use to provide vital state services to our citizens. Those state services include correctional officers in prisons, social workers and other vital staff who watch over the kids of Kansas and their families, and environmental regulation and compliance for water quality.

At last count, the state of Kansas employee workforce had been reduced by 25 percent. That means 25 percent fewer social workers for vulnerable children; 25 percent fewer correctional officers to keep order in prisons; 25 percent fewer employees working with environmental regulation and compliance to keep Kansans healthy; 25 percent fewer Kansas Department of Transportation employees to maintain and repair roads and bridges. This is a loss that is both unacceptable and preventable.

The state of Kansas has had two prison riots since this past June—both directly related to constant and consistent understaffing and inmate overcrowding.

In Kansas, starting pay for a correctional officer is between \$14.66 and \$15.75 per hour. That's \$30,500 to \$32,700 per year, respectively. This job is incredibly mentally and physically demanding and dangerous, which is compounded by the inability of the state of Kansas to hire and retain officers. At Ellsworth Correctional Facility, four correctional officers are responsible for a cell house of 240-plus inmates. And some correctional facilities, such as Norton Correctional Facility (the site of one of the prison riots), have cells designed for one inmate that are now housing three or four inmates.

Because of the lack of staff, the current officers are under mandatory "staffing emergency" work requirements of up to 18-hour shifts at El Dorado Correctional Facility, the site of one of the riots. Their schedule is three 12-hour days and a fourth day of 16 hours. This so-called emergency is a direct result of starving the corrections facilities of funds because of decreased revenues. There is not enough tax money coming into Kansas to properly allocate funds to prisons to hire enough staff at competitive rates, and not enough money to house all of the prisoners the state does have.

In late September of this year, a correctional officer in Kansas committed suicide, and this tragedy was described to our union as directly tied to the extreme stress and long hours of his job.

And the impact of reduced revenue is not limited to correctional facilities.

Kansas is also home to one single-reactor nuclear power plant. Located in Burlington, Kansas, the Wolf Creek Generating Station has been operating since 1985. As with anything of this kind, it requires maintenance, oversight and testing to ensure people living near the plant are safe.

To that end, soil, plant, roadkill, air and water samples are taken from areas around the Wolf Creek station, and these samples are supposed to be tested within the Kansas Health and Environmental Laboratories by the in-house radiochemistry lab. This lab is run and maintained by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, another state agency.

Currently, the KHEL radiochemistry lab is unstaffed. No one works there. The last two people who worked in this lab left in September 2015 due to low pay and rampant mismanagement. Unstaffed for more than two years, no one in Kansas has been testing those samples for radiation.

The agency's answer to this problem is to ship what could be potentially radioactive samples to a laboratory in Coralville, Iowa, using a ground-shipping method. The lab has been doing this since September 2015.

Given the shipping time of the samples, the potential for shipping delays, and the potential for exceeding samples' "hold time"—which would compromise data integrity, rendering the samples unusable—we have absolutely no idea whether the reactor is leaking into the area surrounding the nuclear power plant. If there were some sort of emergency, we'd have no idea—until it was much too late. Everyday working Kansans living around Coffey County could potentially be exposed to a poison that will affect them for years to come.

And don't forget all the added costs for shipping, and the fact that the people shipping these samples might want to know they could possibly contain radioactive isotopes.

The positions for the lab remain open and have been repeatedly advertised on the state of Kansas employment website at \$25.68 per hour for a lab manager and \$22.16 per hour for the lab's chemist. That is \$53,414 and \$46,093 per year, respectively.

Elsewhere in the country, chemists who do the kind of testing Kansas' unstaffed labs need have master's degrees, and often doctorates, in chemistry. The going range of pay for a radiochemistry lab manager nationally is \$80,000 to \$90,000 at the low end. So, because of our budget problems, which have been caused by this tax experiment, we cannot afford to pay valuable and necessary employees a fair rate of pay, and this puts everyday Kansans at grave risk.

On Sept. 21, 2017, an employee for the Kansas Department of Revenue was shot while at work at the department's Wichita office.

This employee had performed a seizure of assets as part of his job as a revenue agent that morning, and that afternoon, the person whose assets were seized came into the revenue office and shot him multiple times, in front of his co-workers. The assailant was buzzed in through a locked door after asking

to talk to the state employee by name—no metal detector, no security guard, no screening of any real significance.

Previously, the Department of Revenue was housed in the Finney building in Wichita, with armed guards and actual security measures. The new revenue office location is in a strip mall. As part of Brownback's ongoing efforts to "shrink government" and "increase efficiency," which is not-so-secret code for privatization of state services, the state of Kansas has moved toward no longer owning or maintaining any buildings, which means that, regarding safety, we are all at the mercy of whoever owns the buildings the state rents. And on Sept. 21, a state employee nearly paid with his life.

One final story: On Oct. 10, 2017, news broke that more than 70 children were missing from Kansas, according to the companies contracted by the Kansas Department for Children and Families to run the state's foster care system.

The state of Kansas literally lost children because it decided to trim spending.

I am here today to implore you to learn from the failed experience of Kansas. Government taxes its citizens so as to responsibly invest in public goods and services that benefit all. When lawmakers decide to starve these public services, people's lives are endangered, harmed irreparably and, sometimes, lost altogether.

Thank you for this opportunity to share these stories with you.