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March 2, 2015

To: Members of the Judiciary Committee

From: Juliet Summers, Policy Coordinator – Child Welfare & Juvenile Justice

**RE: Support for LB 347 – Expand the jurisdiction of the Inspector General to the juvenile justice system**

All children deserve the best opportunities to become healthy and productive adults, and when they become involved in the juvenile justice system, we must ensure that the system is working to enhance, rather than undercut, those opportunities. To that end, Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 347, which would expand the jurisdiction of the Office of the Inspector General for Child Welfare (OIG) to the juvenile justice system.

With the passage of LB 561 in 2013, Nebraska's juvenile justice system underwent significant reform efforts to better serve youth in their own communities. Under this bill, youth with status or delinquency offenses could no longer be made state wards to access services and would now be served by the Office of Probation Administration. Such cases, which previously might have been under the supervision of the Department of Health and Human Services, however, would not be subject to external oversight by the Office of Inspector General of Child Welfare (OIG).

By all accounts, Probation has done an admirable job stepping up to the plate to handle these youth. However, Nebraska children continue to be placed out of their homes in these cases and even at facilities in other states, not subject to Nebraska licensing or direct oversight. Reports and concerns have surfaced from time to time about incidents of injury or excessive force at some of these institutions. At the same time, if an individual probation officer fails to follow through on court orders with a detrimental result to the child, the child and family does not currently have a remedy other than Probation's internal review process. While we believe that Probation would investigate and respond to such incidents with integrity, we also know that external review is always beneficial. External review is a safeguard against real and perceived injustice, ensuring no incident slips through the cracks and increasing public trust in the system.

The OIG already serves an important and independent role in ensuring that all children who come into the care of the state in abuse or neglect cases are kept safe and given the proper supports and services that they need to succeed. LB 347 would maximize state resources, utilizing a structure already in place to extend those same safeguards to children coming into care through the juvenile justice process.

We thank Senator Krist for bringing this issue forward and respectfully urge the committee to advance this bill forward to be considered by the full Legislature. Thank you.