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January 21, 2016

To: Members of the Health and Human Services Committee

From: Julia Tse, Policy Associate

**Re: Support for LB 746 – Adopt the Nebraska Strengthening Families Act**

Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 746, which will bring Nebraska into compliance with the federal Strengthening Families Act. As a member of the stakeholder group that convened around LR 248 to study this issue, we are pleased to see that LB 746 reflects a great deal of collaboration and consensus from across the state.

**Children need normal childhood experiences that can teach them how to manage emotions and stress, develop coping strategies, and navigate their way through life.**<sup>1</sup> Promoting such opportunities is particularly important for our youth in the child welfare system, but participation in extracurricular, cultural, enrichment and social activities can be a challenge for children in foster care. To ease barriers to normalcy, **LB 746 outlines a process centered on the needs of individual children, empowers foster parents to exercise their own judgement, and requires involvement from the Department, agencies, and legal parties.**

Becoming an adult without family support can be especially difficult for youth who have been exposed to trauma—LB 746 also seeks to improve the transition into adulthood for foster youth who are expected to exit the system upon their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday without a family to return to. **On average, independent living accounts for 8% of exits (178 youth in 2014) in Nebraska’s foster care system. Studies have shown navigating adulthood without family support can mean a grim outlook in many areas, including educational attainment, economic well-being, physical and mental health, criminal justice involvement.**<sup>2</sup> A clear and robust process that prepares youth in a developmentally appropriate manner for adulthood can give our youth a better chance at success.

Finally, we support the creation of the Normalcy Task Force through the Children’s Commission. While the statutory changes provided by the bill are significant, as we have often seen with our state child welfare system, continued efforts to monitor and advance next steps are essential to successful implementation.

We thank Senator Campbell and this committee for their leadership in efforts to bring positive change to our child welfare system and urge you to advance this bill. Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Charlyn Harper Browne, “Youth thrive: Advancing healthy adolescent development and well-being,” *Center for the Study of Social Policy*, September 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Mark E. Couortney, et al., “Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26,” Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2011.