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March 14, 2017

To: Members of the Appropriations Committee

From: Julia Tse, Policy Associate

RE: Agency 25, DHHS Division of Children and Family Services Appropriations for FY 2017-19

Children thrive when they can grow up in a safe, permanent, and loving family. Our state has a responsibility to respond effectively to cases of child maltreatment, and to strengthen families in order to prevent abuse or neglect. Voices for Children is concerned that the budget recommendations for the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in the upcoming biennium would seriously hamstring the effectiveness of our child welfare system.

A strong and evidence-based investment in our child welfare system represents our state's collective desire to prioritize the protection and care of vulnerable children. As is in many other states, our system has experienced many challenges, but it is one of the most important investments that we, as a society, can make in the future of Nebraska. Through the tumult, it is unmistakable that the state of our child welfare system has progressed significantly in a short period of time as the direct result of reforms and targeted efforts led by the administration, the Nebraska Legislature, and many stakeholders.

Voices for Children believes that changes proposed for DCFS would permanently damage our ability to respond to cases of child abuse and neglect, and severely undermine progress in our system. **Within the context of potential federal changes that could fundamentally change our ability as a state to protect vulnerable children, we would urge caution in reducing our state investments in children. Furthermore, we are gravely concerned that a number of cuts are proposed with the intention of being "absorbed" by existing DCFS staff, given that child welfare caseloads have consistently been out of statutory compliance.**¹ Without an additional appropriation and thoughtful planning for effective service delivery, further burdening a workforce charged with ensuring the safety and well-being of abused and neglected children can have dire consequences.² Our specific concerns include the following:

Eliminating post-permanency supports that maintain family stability when a child exits the system through adoption or guardianship. The loss of services that strengthen adoptive families is harmful to children and costly to the state, as it is directly related to re-entry into the foster care system. Nebraska identified the need

¹ Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services, "Caseload Report SFY 2015/2016," Report to the Governor and Legislature, September 2016, http://nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/104/PDF/Agencies/Health_and_Human_Services_Department_of/538_20150918-151147.pdf.

² Office of Inspector General of Nebraska Child Welfare, "Annual Report 2015-2016," September 2016, http://nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/104/PDF/Agencies/Inspector_General_of_Nebraska_Child_Welfare/285_20160914-113017.pdf.

for such services in 2008 in the wake of the Safe Haven crisis, when state law was amended to allow parents or guardians to leave children of all ages at safe sites without punishment. Within months, many teenagers were left at such sites, 75% of whom were from adoptive or guardianship homes. The defunding of post-permanency supports is short-sighted and sends the wrong message to our most vulnerable children and adoptive families, who are an incredible resource to our state.

Reducing referrals of relative and kinship foster parents to child-placing agencies for ongoing support services by 50%, and requiring already-overburdened DCFS staff to absorb these services with no additional appropriation. Parental separation can be extremely traumatic for children, but when it is necessary, research shows that placement with a relative can minimize trauma and result in better long-term outcomes. Relative and kinship placements are now the most common out-of-home placement in our state, and this proposal would undercut our progress.

Eliminating services that engage relatives and other sources of social support for children who are languishing in care, and requiring already-overburdened DCFS staff to absorb these services with no additional appropriation. The Family Finding model is a promising practice utilized across the country, and is especially important to older youth and children of color, who typically remain in care for longer periods of time. Foster care should be temporary, but unfortunately many children in the care of our state remain without a family for far too long, and many never find a permanent home. In 2015, the median length of stay in care was 17 months—in one extreme case, a child remained in foster care for 13 years. All too often, children in our foster care system lack the social support necessary to find success, and we believe that it is imperative to continue funding targeted permanency efforts.

Eliminating or reducing state funding for domestic violence services. In 2015, 537 Nebraska children were placed into foster care due to domestic violence. The reduction or termination of funding for community-based agencies that administer emergency services to victims of domestic violence would likely result in even more children entering the child welfare system due to domestic violence.

Voices for Children believes that successful stewardship of our state is not just about looking at where we are today, but thinking about where we want to be tomorrow. The changes proposed in the executive and agency budgets, in combination with other proposals that would permanently reduce revenue streams paints a vision of Nebraska as a place where we will continually underinvest in meeting the needs of abused and neglected children. **We are speaking out today on behalf of the children in our state, as well as many other citizens, to say that neglecting the needs of our vulnerable children is contrary to the values of many Nebraskans.**

We thank this committee for their time and consideration and respectfully urge you to preserve these important services moving forward. Thank you.