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February 23, 2017

**To:** Chairman Riepe and Members of the Health & Human Services Committee  
**From:** Juliet Summers, Policy Coordinator  
**Re:** **LB 179, a bill changing provisions relating to transition of young adults to independence**

For young people exiting our child welfare and juvenile justice systems on the cusp of adulthood, the sudden transition from structural supports and requirements to complete independence can be a difficult path to navigate safely. Thankfully, Nebraska has an excellent extended foster care program to assist young adults leaving the foster care system without having achieved permanency in a family setting as they find their way into adulthood (Bridge to Independence, a.k.a. "b2I"). I am happy to be here today on behalf of Voices for Children, Nebraska Appleseed, and the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation to voice our strong support for LB 179, which would extend eligibility for the b2I program to a subset of youth exiting juvenile probation without family supports.

This bill represents nearly two years' work and the input of a myriad of stakeholders, state experts in child welfare and juvenile justice, and substantial national technical assistance. In 2015, the Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee of the Children's Commission formed a taskforce to make recommendations regarding how best to extend the program to other vulnerable populations. I served as co-chair of that task force, though for the record I am not representing the task force or the Commission today. We held focus groups with youth and adult stakeholders across the state, and the taskforce drew representation from both child welfare and juvenile justice fields of expertise. We learned that there is broad consensus supporting a voluntary program of extended services for young people aging out of the juvenile justice system without a stable system of family supports. The work of the taskforce continued through the Bridge to Independence advisory committee in 2016, and for the past two years, one of the recommendations in the Nebraska Children's Commission's annual report to the Legislature has been to open up eligibility for our current b2I program to the very small subset of our juvenile probation population who are aging out of the system with no home to return to.

This recommendation came out of ongoing evidence that, though they may have come to the attention of our court system through a criminal act or misbehavior, there are youth lingering in placement on probation not because they themselves have failed to rehabilitate, but because they lack a home to return to and child welfare proceedings have not been initiated due to their age. At the age of nineteen, when juvenile court jurisdiction runs out, they may find themselves abruptly homeless. 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, and criminal justice involvement.<sup>1</sup> These are young adults who, without a support system, are at the highest risk to drop out of school, fail in their vocational plans, and recidivate – this time burdening our adult correctional system.

The child advocacy organizations I represent today are unified in supporting LB 179 because it is a carefully crafted plan that captures the Children’s Commission recommendation, with the right eligibility parameters to extend transitional supports to the population who need it without being over- or under-inclusive, in a way that should enable Nebraska to draw down more federal funds to financially support the program’s expansion.

We believe that by providing a system of supports to young people who would otherwise be set adrift after system involvement, Nebraska can ensure their safe transition to a productive and healthy adulthood – benefitting our state as a whole.

With that, I’d like to thank this Committee for all your time and commitment to ensuring our systems serve and protect Nebraska’s vulnerable populations, and to thank Senator Bolz for her dedication to Nebraska’s young people. I’d be happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark E. Courtney, et al., “Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26,” Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2011.