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March 17, 2017

To: Senator Riepe and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee  
From: Kaitlin Reece, Policy Coordinator for Economic Stability and Health  
RE: LB 552-Provide for the Children's Connection program

All children need access to health care, including mental health care, to ensure they meet their full potential and grow up to be healthy and productive adults. Without adequate mental health care, children are at risk for a series of risk factors, including involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

**Voices for Children supports LB 552 because it creates a comprehensive, evidence-based infrastructure of mental and behavioral health services based on success in the Omaha area through Project Harmony's *Connections* program.** Investing in this infrastructure will reap benefits as we get these at-risk youth the help they need *before* they go on to engage in behaviors that require court intervention. A statewide system, thoughtfully planned and implemented to reach across institutional silos, would provide a safety net to keep kids and communities safer.

**National research shows that as many as 70% of the youth involved with the juvenile justice system have an identified mental disorder, and one in five suffer from a mental illness so severe as to impair their ability to function as a young person and grow into a responsible adult.<sup>1</sup>**

LB 552 helps address a critical need in Nebraska. Our latest Kids count report found that 92 out of Nebraska's 93 counties are experiencing a mental health provider shortage. This astounding statistic is especially troubling when we consider the following:

- 20.6% of children 4 months to 5 years were at moderate to high risk of behavioral or developmental problems based on parents' specific concerns.
- 70.7% of children needing mental health counseling actually received it.
- 24.1% of teens felt sad or hopeless every day for 2+ weeks in the past year.<sup>2</sup> Notably, this percentage has increased almost 5% from 2013.

The data are clear that something must be done to achieve greater mental and behavioral health coverage for children in Nebraska. LB 552 provides an evidence-based way forward to ensure our kids grow up to be healthy and resilient adults. We thank Senator Walz for bringing forward this important legislation and encourage the Health and Human Services Committee to advance LB 552 for consideration by the full Legislature.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen R. Skowrya and Joseph J. Coccozza. *Blueprint for Change: A Comprehensive Model for the Identification and Treatment of Youth with Mental Health Needs in Contact with the Juvenile Justice System* National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, Draft January 2006), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Kids Count in Nebraska Annual Report, 2016.