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To: Members of the Health and Human Services Committee

From: Julia Tse, Policy Associate

RE: Opposition to LB 334, to eliminate a Family Finding pilot project

All children need loving and permanent relationships with adults that they can learn from and trust, especially abused and neglected children that are in the state's care. Voices for Children in Nebraska opposes LB 334, which terminates contracts for a Family Finding pilot project.

The Family Finding model is a promising practice that has been employed across the country to find a lifetime network of support for children in foster care who lack legal and emotional permanency. The model is an intensive approach that seeks to create lifetime connections for disconnected youth by finding and engaging family members and other supportive adults. Although this may include finding physical, legal permanence through adoption or guardianship, the program also seeks to create a broader sense of permanent belonging that so many of our children in care are lacking, by surrounding them with involved and supportive adults.

We all know that children do best in a stable family that can support them for a lifetime, and foster care is intended to be temporary for this reason. Unfortunately, many children in the care of our state remain without a forever home for far too long, and many never find a permanent place to call home before they turn 19. **In 2015, the median length of stay in care was 17 months, and in one case, a child remained in care for 161 months—over 13 years. Of the youth who exited from care last year, just over 6%, or 105 young people, “aged out” of the system without a family to go home to.**¹

The progress that our state foster care system has seen in recent years, thanks to the hard work of this Legislature, has a real and life-changing effect on Nebraska's most vulnerable children. The data show that there is always more that we can do as a state, and we believe that eliminating this important investment in finding families for children who are languishing in state care takes us a step backward.

We are especially concerned that the executive budget recommendations that accompany LB 334 show that service delivery of Family Finding will shift from contracted agencies to department staff. Last fall, Voices for Children provided testimony on LR 513 in this committee, which examined workforce issues in our child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The latest annual report issued by the Office of the Inspector General of Child Welfare found that caseloads are substantially out of compliance with state law, and were directly contributing to negative outcomes for

¹ Data obtained from the Department of Health and Human Services.

children, including 2 deaths and 9 serious injuries of system-involved children.² **We are troubled to see that Family Finding and a number of other important child welfare services will be cut and absorbed by department staff when current caseloads put child safety at risk. Family Finding, like other interventions intended to improve the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in foster care, requires specialized training and adequate resources to implement with fidelity, which we believe to be difficult to achieve without proper investments.**

We thank Senator Riepe for his commitment to children in our state and the Committee for their time and consideration. We respectfully urge the committee to indefinitely postpone LB 334. Thank you.

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