



7521 Main Street, Suite 103
Ralston, Nebraska 68127

(402) 597-3100 P
(402) 597-2705 F

<http://voicesforchildren.com>

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February 18, 2015

To: Members of the Health and Human Services Committee

From: Aubrey Mancuso, Policy Coordinator

Re: Support for LB 335

For over two decades, Voices for Children in Nebraska has sought to use data to help identify pressing issues facing Nebraska kids. With almost 1 in 5 Nebraska kids currently living below the official poverty line¹, poverty is clearly established issue facing our next generation.

Poverty creates a variety of challenges for kids ranging from lack of adequate educational opportunities to inadequate access to health care to unsafe or unstable housing. We need to do more to ensure that all kids in our state have the best possible opportunity to succeed regardless of the circumstances that they are born into.

Many of the tools we have for addressing poverty either mitigate the immediate consequences of poverty – for example by providing food to those who are otherwise unable to afford it – or are highly fragmented. We rely on a patchwork of programs and services with different rules and different goals to tackle a large collective problem. While these resources are important and can be tools in addressing poverty, we are unlikely to be able to fully address poverty without a more comprehensive approach.

From a research perspective, we have learned more about poverty and how to address it in recent years, including that poverty can have a multi-generational impact on a family. One important thing to consider in addressing generational poverty we need to consider assets in addition to income. About 1 in 4 Nebraska households is liquid asset poor, meaning that they lack the available financial resources to subsist at the poverty level for three months in the absence of income.² What this means is that for some kids, their family has additional resources to help them access higher education, to help with transportation to their first job, or a home that will be passed on to them some day while other children do not. Practically speaking, it means that children who spent their childhood struggling with the various challenges related to poverty will also enter adulthood with less resources than their higher income peers.

Additionally, many of our interventions to address poverty do not adequately account for the family as a unit. In recent years, increased attention has been

¹ 17.7% Annual Kids Count in Nebraska Report 2014

² CFED Assets and Opportunities Scorecard 2014

focused on the promise of “two-generation strategies”, which seek to integrate programs and systems in ways that improve overall family well-being rather than focusing on individual members.

When we talk about poverty, it often seems like an overwhelming and intractable challenge. While it is complex and multi-faceted, there are lessons to be learned from successful attempts to address poverty both in the United States and elsewhere. One example in the U.S. is the significant reduction in elderly poverty rates over the past several decades. It was through public policy interventions – namely Social Security and Medicare – that we were able to reverse this trend.

Secondly, at the same time that we have seen a significant increase in child poverty rates in the U.S., child poverty has been cut in half in the United Kingdom. Through an intentional effort to address child poverty, the U.K. saw poverty rates among children continue to decrease even as they were hit by an international recession.³

These two examples illustrate that poverty is a problem that can be addressed through public policies and strategic interventions. Nebraska is a state with an abundance of resources. We have a generally low overall unemployment rate, a strong philanthropic community, and strong business and agricultural industries. I believe we have many of the resources we need to address poverty, but we need to take a more international and collective approach.

LB 335 would be an important first step in formulating a more comprehensive plan to address poverty and we urge the committee to advance the bill.

Thank you.

³ Waldfogel (2010) Tacking Poverty and Improving Child Well-Being: Lessons from Britain

