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March 5, 2015

To: Members of the Health and Human Services Committee

From: Juliet Summers, Policy Coordinator – Child Welfare & Juvenile Justice

RE: **Support for LB 499 – Require DHHS to provide behavioral and mental health services**

Children in Nebraska are suffering from a shortage of mental and behavioral health services. Recognizing that the current language is a placeholder until a more specific plan can be worked out, Voices for Children in Nebraska supports the goal of LB 499, because improving access to mental and behavioral health services in our state will ensure every child gets the care he needs to grow into a healthy, productive adult.

In our latest Kids Count report, we noted that in 2013, **92 of our 93 counties had 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.
- 19.5% of teens felt sad or hopeless every day for 2+ weeks in the past year.<sup>1</sup>

The data are clear that something must be done to achieve greater mental and behavioral health coverage for children in Nebraska.

**Moreover, 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>2</sup> Investing in an infrastructure of mental and behavioral health services 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.

We thank Senator Krist and this Committee for your continued efforts on behalf of children in Nebraska.

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<sup>1</sup> Kids Count in Nebraska Annual Report, 2014.

<sup>2</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.