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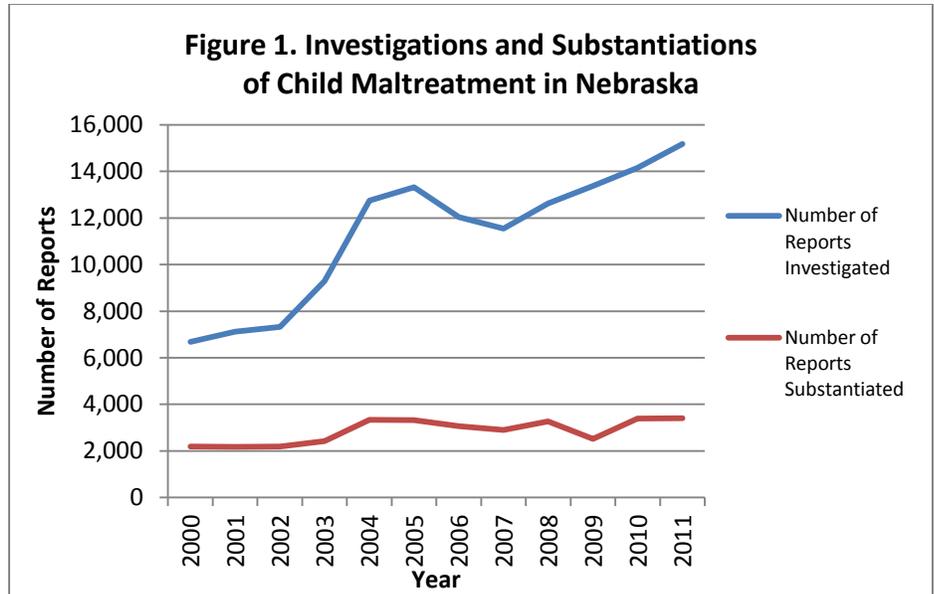
March 15, 2013

To: Members of the Judiciary Committee
From: Sarah Forrest, Policy Coordinator- Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice
Re: **Support for LB 503 – Implementing an Alternative Response Pilot Project**

We all want children to grow up protected, safe, and loved. Our child welfare system in Nebraska must strengthen our families to prevent abuse and neglect from ever happening and respond thoughtfully whenever abuse or neglect occurs so children can have a safe, loving, permanent home as quickly as possible.

Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 503, which implements an alternative response pilot project, because:

- One size doesn't fit all in our child welfare system.** Nationally, and in Nebraska the majority of children come into our child welfare system because families cannot meet their basic needs, which is often related to poverty. Nebraska's rate of neglect (83% of all child welfare cases) is even higher than national rates.¹ Alternative response will allow us to better meet the needs of these children and families, focusing on assessment and connection to formal and informal supports which will strengthen our families who are at risk.
- Alternative response will make the front door of our child welfare system more effective and efficient.** Nebraska is one of only a few states that has only one option for responding to allegations of child maltreatment: investigation. Over the past decade, the number of investigations in Nebraska has increased dramatically, but the number of substantiated reports has grown more slowly. We are spending resources on investigating low-risk families that could be better spent on helping families keep their children safe quickly and get them access to the services and supports they need.



¹ Kids Count in Nebraska 2012 Report.

3. **Alternative Response can strengthen our in-home and voluntary services.** Nebraska's numbers of children and families served without court involvement and in their homes is growing. In order to continue this trend and build a system where families and children are protected, we must create policies that provide guidelines, oversight, and evaluation. LB 503 will allow Nebraska to change some of its inefficient and ineffective policies slowly and carefully.

LB 503 has the potential to transform our child welfare system to one that effectively works with families to keep their children safe. Feedback from stakeholders on improving LB 503 will be important to alternative response's success in our state, but we feel that it is a crucial step to reforming our child welfare system and ensuring children and families are safer, sooner. We thank Senator Coash for introducing this important bill and we urge the committee to advance the bill, while keeping the need for transparency, accountability, oversight, and careful, planful implementation in mind.

