



7521 Main Street, Suite 103  
Ralston, Nebraska 68127

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

<http://voicesforchildren.com>

**BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

Eric Nelson  
*President*

Tim Hron, MA, LIMHP  
*Vice President*

Donna Hammack, MSEd  
*Secretary*

Steve Mitchell  
*Treasurer*

Yolanda Chavez Nuncio, MEd  
Catherine Damico, JD  
Jeremy Fitzpatrick, JD  
Joel Jacobs  
Eric Johnson  
Lloyd Meyer  
Daniel Padilla  
Michael Socha

Aubrey Mancuso, MSW  
*Executive Director*

A member of:



Find us on:



February 3, 2016

**To:** Chairperson Campbell and Members of the Health & Human Services Committee  
**From:** Juliet Summers, Policy Coordinator  
**Re:** **LB 866, the Transition to Adult Living Services Act**

Navigating the path to adulthood can be difficult, even for those young people who have every advantage. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 866, because we believe our systems should ensure that every child has the support they need to succeed.

This bill is the result of the work of a broad community of stakeholders, representing input from service providers, lawyers, probation officers, DHHS caseworkers, judges, and young people in our juvenile justice system. Focus groups were held across the state to gather widespread and diverse opinions on the question of a possible program of extended supports for young people aging out of the juvenile justice system. More than 80 youth at various levels of involvement with the system, and more than 40 adults from across the state participated in focus groups. A taskforce drawn from the Bridge to Independence and Office of Juvenile Services subcommittees of the Nebraska Children's Commission synthesized the focus group input and, with facilitation and fiscal analysis by the national Mainspring Consulting group, drafted the final recommendations approved by the Commission and presented to the Legislature in its December 2015 report.

What we learned through this process is there is broad consensus supporting a voluntary program of extended services for young people aging out of the juvenile justice system, particularly those who have spent time in out-of-home placement and may be leaving that placement without a supportive family or home to return to. We heard from probation officers who had to drop off young people at homeless shelters on their 19th birthdays because jurisdiction had ended and there was nowhere else to go. We were shown photos of babies by young men in the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center at Kearney, desperately hoping to be good fathers upon release but expressing how little they knew about supporting themselves, much less a family. Meanwhile, we heard stories of hope and possibility about the successes of the Bridge to Independence program on the child welfare side of our system, and over and over, expressions of disappointment that this special program is available for some youth involved in our juvenile courts but not others – when in all the ways that matter, many of these the youth are exactly the same.

LB 866 represents a combination of the Commission's two primary recommendations, aimed at providing extended voluntary support for those youth who most need help transitioning out of the court system and into successful adulthood. Youth who are aging out of the juvenile justice system in out-of-home placement, and have been in placement for three months or more, are the most likely to face challenges as they shift from the structure and supervision of court

oversight and institutionalization to the sudden independence of legal adulthood. By providing a voluntary program of case management and a critical needs fund to draw on, those young adults who lack parental support and face homelessness will have an identified professional they can turn to for assistance, and a means of emergency support to keep them off the street and on track to a brighter future. LB 866 would benefit our communities as a whole by offering stability, guidance, and a transition plan to young people who might otherwise flounder.

I would like to raise two points for possible amendment, which are based on the feedback of the stakeholders and the formal recommendations of the Commission:

**1) Permit case closure between 18 and 19:** Stakeholders didn't want to see juvenile justice cases or placement orders artificially lengthened for the purposes of accessing extended services. Setting eligibility at the 19<sup>th</sup> birthday may mean that some young people who no longer need the formal supervision of probation and the court but would benefit from voluntary assistance will nonetheless remain under formal supervision until age-out. An amendment opening program eligibility to young people whose cases close between their 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> birthdays, who had been in out of home placement for at least 90 days preceding case closure, would ameliorate this concern and best mirror the Commission's recommendations. I have attached to my testimony a modified fiscal estimate put together by Voices, based on Mainspring's methodology and Probation's actual numbers of youth likely to be affected, showing what the numbers might look like if this change were adopted.

**2) Clarify language to make this a contract-for-service model:** Many private entities throughout the state already offer the type of case management services envisioned in LB 866, and Mainspring's work and the Commission's recommendations were based on assumptions of a contracting model. This recommendation was always linked with a desire not to "reinvent the wheel" or create a "separate, unequal" program for this population. A contract-for-service model would be cost-effective, drawing upon resources that already exist and meshing the state's investment with private funding to maximize efficiency. Meanwhile, DHHS runs a terrific in-house program in Bridge to Independence, and stakeholders remain hopeful that future work can result in opening the doors to Bridge itself for a subpopulation of the juvenile justice youth who need the full assistance it provides. Creating a separate in-house program would result in a two-tiered system, disadvantaging young adults coming out of probation cases, and potentially closing the door on further efforts to expand the benefits of Bridge.

Nebraska is a good place to grow up, and this legislation will fill a gap to make sure all our kids have the opportunity to grow into healthy, successful adults. We thank Senator Bolz for her dedication and commitment to Nebraska's young people and for bringing this important legislation, and would respectfully urge this Committee to move it forward.