



7521 Main Street, Suite 103
Ralston, Nebraska 68127

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

<http://voicesforchildren.com>

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January 28, 2016

To: Chairman Krist and Members of the Executive Board Committee

From: Juliet Summers, Policy Coordinator

Re: LB 954, a bill relating to investigations by the Office of the Inspector General

Nebraska has made great strides in improving juvenile justice in recent years, and our kids deserve nothing less than an effective system that responds to risk and needs thoughtfully and with care, based on evidence-tested practices. The reforms contained in LB 561 of 2014 have great potential, and the leadership of the Courts and Probation Administration is admirably committed to these goals. At Voices for Children, we are relieved that compromise has been reached so that those positive reforms can continue to play out for our kids.

Even so, we supported LB 347 last year, because external oversight is always beneficial as a check against human error, potential abuses, and systemic flaws that require correction. Even with the best of intentions and efforts, things can go wrong. An office that investigates when things have gone wrong, but keeps those investigations confidential and uses its power only to make recommendations to improve system response is a special tool, unique to Nebraska. Other states meet those same moments, all too often, with costly litigation.

We believe, without undue drama, that children's lives are in the balance. The Inspector General investigates when a child has died or been seriously injured in state care, or when someone has had such a traumatic experience they have chosen to speak up and make a complaint. When the IG makes recommendations, the only goal is to improve the system so that such deaths, injuries, and complaints never happen again. Our children in the juvenile justice system deserve this added protection no less than our children in the child welfare system.

Voices for Children supports this bill in the understanding that it represents an agreement that will allow both Probation and the IG to do their important work, continuing to improve our system response for all our children.

We thank Senator Krist for his ongoing commitment to juvenile justice reform, all the parties involved in LB 954 for their efforts and work to come to consensus on behalf of Nebraska's children, and this Committee for your time and consideration.