



7521 Main Street, Suite 103
Omaha, Nebraska 68127

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

www.voicesforchildren.com

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March 16, 2017

Senator Ebke, Chair – Judiciary Committee

Room 1113, Nebraska State Capitol Lincoln, NE 68509

RE: Support for LB 145 - Provide for a hearing to determine financial ability to pay fines and costs and traffic citations and provide for community service

Dear Chair Ebke and Members of the Judiciary Committee,

Children need stability to thrive, and parental well-being is tied to child well-being. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 145 because it protects the children of low-income parents who become trapped by fines and fees within the criminal justice system.

Existing laws that trap Nebraskans in jail because they cannot afford court-ordered fines or fees is harmful to children. Recent estimates show that at least 41,000 Nebraska children, or nine percent of all children in our state, have had a parent in jail or prison at some point during their childhood. The loss of a parent is distressing for children, and the research tells us that there is much cause for concern. The criminalization of poverty only exacerbates the challenges that children face when a parent is jailed. This practice jeopardizes the financial stability of low-income families by preventing parents from working and potentially causing unemployment. Moreover, parental separation can be tremendously traumatizing to children, and has been linked to a lifetime of poor outcomes in physical and mental health, educational achievement, economic stability, and justice involvement.¹ Unfair policy and practice within our criminal justice system unequivocally harm the children of affected individuals.

Voices for Children has heard of the devastating toll of parental incarceration from Nebraska families during a series of community conversations, and we believe that LB 145 presents an important opportunity for our state to better protect innocent children who pay the price when a parent is jailed for being poor. The practice of debtors' prisons prevents parents from providing the love and care that every child needs. We thank Senator Hansen for bringing this important issue forward and this committee for their time and consideration. We respectfully urge you to advance LB 145.

Sincerely,

Julia Tse, Policy Associate

¹ Jack P. Shonkoff, et al, "The Lifelong Effects of Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress," *Pediatrics* 129, no. 1 (2012):236.