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March 14, 2017

To: Members of the Appropriations Committee

From: Julia Tse, Policy Associate

**RE: LB 189 – Appropriate funds to the Department of Health and Human Services for recruitment and retention of caseworkers**

Nebraska children coming into the care of the state through our child welfare system deserve a system structured and funded to promote a thoughtful yet timely response. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 189 because it prioritizes the safety and well-being of the most vulnerable children in our state.

Ensuring that the safety and well-being of Nebraska's children are protected is one of the most basic responsibilities of our state. Insufficient investments in this system have grave consequences, as we saw in the most recent annual report issued by the Office of Inspector General of Child Welfare. This recent report found that high caseloads were directly related to injuries and even deaths of children in the care of our state. LB 189 is an important first step to ensuring that Nebraska can adequately attract and retain the most qualified candidates to carry out extremely important work on behalf of our state.

The primary set of recommendations from the Children's Commission's Workforce Workgroup propose bringing salaries in line with regional averages and offering greater student loan forgiveness, particularly for workers taking employment in underserved areas of the state. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2015, the mean wage for child and family social workers in Nebraska was \$39,440, lower than nearly all of our surrounding states: Iowa (\$43,140), Kansas (\$40,810), South Dakota (\$39,580), Colorado (\$47,960), and Wyoming (\$45,130). The national mean wage for child and family social workers employed by state government (excluding schools and hospitals) was \$45,730. Given the Workforce Workgroup's findings that the average tenure for a child welfare worker in Nebraska is only 3.19 years, and the cost of training a replacement is between \$30,000 and \$36,000, appropriations that go toward recruitment and retention of child welfare caseworkers should be perceived as an investment—not a financial burden.

Our case managers are the front line of service to our state's youth, and we depend upon them to fulfill our promise to Nebraska's children. LB 189 is an important opportunity for Nebraska to prioritize the important work of our child welfare workforce and the children that they serve.

Thank you to the Committee for all your time and work to protect Nebraska's children, and to Senator Howard for bringing this important issue forward.