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February 8, 2018

To: Chairman Riepe and members of the Health and Human Services Committee
From: Juliet Summers, Policy Coordinator at Voices for Children in Nebraska
Re: **LB 1046 – provide for a caseload emergency**

Nebraska children coming to the attention of our child protective system deserve a system structured and funded to promote a thoughtful yet timely response. Our case managers and initial assessment workers are the front line of service to our state's youth, and we depend upon them to use careful judgment and build strong relationships with children and families to promote the best outcomes. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 1046, because when we fail to adequately fund and support our child welfare workforce, it is children who suffer the consequences.

To be clear, those consequences have sometimes been deadly. In five consecutive reports by the Inspector General of Child Welfare, every year since 2012, the office has identified high caseloads as a systemic factor contributing to the cases investigated.¹ **In the 2015-2016 annual report alone, 11 cases of child death or serious injury are described, including but not limited to: abusive head trauma, battered child syndrome, starvation, death by drowning, and death by abusive head trauma.**² The investigation by the IG into these deaths and injuries revealed that “the CFS employees interviewed – from frontline staff to Central Office Administrators – identified caseload and workload as the primary obstacles to improving Initial Assessment practice and doing thorough work.”³ Excessive caseloads lead to cut corners, which contribute to flawed investigations and case work, which leave children unprotected.

DHHS has taken steps to improve workforce retention and caseload sizes in recent years. The percent of staff carrying caseloads exceeding the standards dropped between 2016 and 2018. **However, according to DHHS data presented to this Committee, 10% of initial assessment staff, 16% of ongoing case management staff, and 32% of combined IA/ongoing staff still carry caseloads exceeding the standards.**⁴ If we do not continue working urgently to ensure we have an adequate number of well-trained, well-supported case managers with appropriate caseloads, we will continue to experience tragic (and tragically avoidable) outcomes.

If the deaths of children who have been identified as in need of protection by our state does not constitute an emergency, I cannot imagine what would. We thank Senator Bolz for bringing LB 1046, and thank this committee for your time and consideration. We strongly urge you to advance it.

¹Office of the Inspector General of Nebraska Child Welfare Annual Report 2016-2017. P 11.

²Office of the Inspector General of Nebraska Child Welfare Annual Report 2015-2016. P 35.

³Id. at page 47

⁴Caseload Summary & Workforce Initiatives. DHHS Division of Child & Family Services. January 25, 2018.