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February 10, 2020

To: Chairman Stinner and Members of the Appropriations Committee
From: Juliet Summers, Policy Coordinator for Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice
Re: **LB 1146 to appropriate funds for the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center at Kearney**

When youth encounter our state systems, the care they receive will affect not only their futures, but ripple out to touch their families, communities, and Nebraska's future as a whole. We cannot be thoughtful enough when structuring our system, to ensure that every taxpayer dollar spent goes toward quality programs, services, supervision and supports. I write you today to provide neutral testimony on LB 1146, because while Voices for Children in Nebraska absolutely supports investments to ensure our state facilities provide adequate privacy for youth in care, we remain unconvinced that the current physical footprint of our state Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers is necessarily the right one for our youth and we are hesitant to endorse significant further capital investments in a facility that, perhaps, has no place in a future vision of our state juvenile justice system.

The facility footprint we have has existed for well over 100 years, with Kearney initially built in 1879 and Geneva in 1891. Both pre-dated the very idea of a separate juvenile court in the United States, and both existed for well over half a century before the first juvenile court was founded in Nebraska in 1959. For much of their history the facilities were known as "Youth Development Centers" and operated through the state Department of Corrections. It was only in the 1990s, in part through the process of the state coming into compliance with the federal Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention Act, that the facilities were renamed the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers and the Office of Juvenile Services was created, then eventually moved out of Corrections and into the Department of Health and Human Services.¹

Subsequent administrative and legislative changes have made reforms, such as articulating eligibility criteria and a judicial process for commitment, but the physical structures of the campuses, their locations, and frankly, much of the correctional institutional culture has remained the same. Every year our admissions to these two facilities have gone down, requiring less and less physical space, but the level of treatment interventions required for youth has risen, requiring more licensed and trained staff. To this end, if any investments are to be made in the facility, expenditures on privacy for the youth committed there is likely to boost morale and decrease stress levels, potentially contributing to increased safety.

¹ A good summary can be found in Terra Luna, *Retrospective Developmental Evaluation of Juvenile Justice Reform in Nebraska*. Prepared for the Nebraska Court Improvement Project. March 2017: p 1-5. Available online: https://supremecourt.nebraska.gov/sites/default/files/Programs/CIP/developmental_evaluation_jjhbi.pdf

On the other hand, we should carefully consider the long-term viability of the facility where it exists today. In SFY 2018-2019, prior to the shut-down of Geneva, there were 152 youth admitted to the two facilities (109 to Kearney, 43 to Geneva) but the cost to run them was \$ 19,753,256.² We are facing different challenges, with a different mission, than those the campuses in Kearney and Geneva were initially built to meet in the 1800s. **Moreover, we know a great deal more now about what works to rehabilitate youth for the long-term – and so much of it revolves around maintaining strong positive connections to family and community.** For a price tag of nearly \$20 million annually to taxpayers, it is worth considering all our options before doubling down on investments in our current physical plant.

We are in a moment of opportunity, as our state agency undergoes a visioning process to thoughtfully craft – we hope, with legislative oversight and the input of stakeholders including youth and families – a new plan for the YRTC. This is a time to think boldly about what remarkable things we can do as a state for our youth. Investing \$3 million to improve the quality of life for youth committed to Kearney is something Voices for Children supports, but in a ranked-preference world, we would rather see that funding invested thoughtfully to reduce our reliance on the current YRTC-Kearney at all, in favor of finally moving toward a best-practice model for small, regional, therapeutic facilities for high-risk, high-need youth.

I have been in contact with Senator Howard throughout the fall and in the process of bill introduction with all these thoughts and am grateful for this opportunity to share them here. Voices for Children is thankful for her leadership and the Health and Human Services' Committee's hard work on behalf of Nebraska youth. Thank you, as well, to this Committee, for your thoughtful consideration of the best interests of Nebraska's precious resource: our young people.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Juliet Summers". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned centrally below the word "Sincerely,".

Juliet Summers

² Department of Health and Human Services, *Office of Juvenile Services Annual Legislative Report SFY 2019*. Available at https://nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/106/PDF/Agencies/Health_and_Human_Services_Department_of/488_20190916-162916.pdf