



7521 Main Street, Suite 103  
Omaha, Nebraska 68127

(402) 597-3100  
www.voicesforchildren.com

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February 5, 2020

**To:** Chairman Howard and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee  
**From:** Juliet Summers, Policy Coordinator for Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice  
**Re: LB 1150 Require the youth rehabilitation and treatment centers to be fully operational by July 1, 2021**

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 ongoing supports. I am providing neutral testimony today on LB 1150, because while Voices for Children in Nebraska absolutely supports a requirement that any facility serving our youth be fully staffed, supervised, and outfitted to meet their needs, 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 do not want to cut off avenues for revisioning how and where young people may best have their treatment needs met.

Yesterday in support of LB 1140 and 1141 I testified to the history of the YRTCs, and I share the same history here as a background for our concerns. **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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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](https://supremecourt.nebraska.gov/sites/default/files/Programs/CIP/developmental_evaluation_jjhbi.pdf)

**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.<sup>2</sup>** 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 \$20 million annually to taxpayers, it is worth considering all of our options.

We should not feel tied as a state to what we have always had and done, simply because we have had it and done it. 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's. This is a time to think boldly about what we remarkable things we can do as a state for our youth.

I reached out to Senator Brandt with these thoughts earlier in the week, and am grateful for this opportunity to share them here. Thank you, as always, to the Committee for your thoughtful consideration of the best interests of Nebraska's precious resource: our young people. I would be happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>2</sup> 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](https://nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/106/PDF/Agencies/Health_and_Human_Services_Department_of/488_20190916-162916.pdf)