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February 14, 2020

To: Chairman Lathrop and Members of the Judiciary Committee
From: Juliet Summers, Policy Coordinator for Child Welfare & Juvenile Justice
Re: **LB 1171 to change provisions under the Healthy Pregnancies for Incarcerated Women Act**

Every child deserves to experience healthy, loving relationships from the moment of birth, and every young mother deserves the supports we can offer to foster and sustain that relationship. Teenage parenting can be hard enough to navigate, but successful teenage parenting becomes nearly impossible when youth are involved in systems that actively prevent them from bonding with and learning how to care for their infants. To this end, I am here today on behalf of Voices for Children to support the provisions of LB 1171 that pertain to fostering relationships between mothers and their babies during commitment to a Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center (YRTC).

In Nebraska, when a pregnant woman is incarcerated at the Nebraska Women's Correctional Facility in York, if she meets certain qualifications she has access to the Parenting Program, which includes parenting education and day and overnight visitation, but for women who are pregnant while incarcerated, this can also mean actually staying with their babies in the specially designed nursery program after birth up to 18 months. By contrast, for young mothers committed to YRTC, no such program currently exists. A mother may participate in the Mothers & Babies program, but it only provides for education and visitation – not a wraparound, supportive approach to learning to parent 24-7, with the opportunity to breastfeed and bond in the crucial early weeks and months of the baby's life. This is a missed opportunity, for both the mother and the child.

National recommendations for supporting pregnant and parenting teens encourage practitioners to offer programs that promote protective factors in the parent such as self-efficacy and strong connections to family, and in particular, to help build teen mothers' parenting competencies through culturally sensitive approaches.¹ As Nebraska undergoes the planning process to modernize our troubled YRTC system, this is a moment of opportunity to radically re-think all aspects of programming, including our response when a committed child is about to have a child herself. I have heard former Inspector General Rogers testify in the past weeks regarding the YRTCs, and one note has stuck out to me: one of the girls removed from Geneva to Kearney this fall was, herself, born at Geneva. Every policy choice we make regarding next steps with the YRTCs should be aimed at breaking that intergenerational cycle.

¹ Child Welfare Information Gateway, *Promoting Protective Factors for Pregnant and Parenting Teens: A Guide for Practitioners*. September 2015. Available at https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/guide_teen.pdf

Developing clear policies regarding family separation, investing in appropriate living space for children to safely reside with their mothers post-partum whenever possible, and incorporating hands-on parenting into a mother's individualized treatment plan, would truly reflect Nebraska's family values.

Thank you to Senator Cavanaugh for sponsoring this bill and being a champion for the mothers of Nebraska, and thank you to this Committee for your consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions.