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January 31, 2020

To: Chairwoman Howard and Members of the HHS Committee
From: Juliet Summers, Policy Coordinator for Child Welfare & Juvenile Justice
Re: LB 977 - Change provisions relating to the case management lead agency model pilot project

Nebraska children coming into the care of the state through our child welfare system have already experienced abuse or neglect, and deserve a system structured at every stage to promote safety, well-being, and a thoughtful yet timely response. Every transition of authority in child welfare creates an opportunity for upheaval, lack of stability, and uncertainty in active cases, and considerations of state contracting should never trump ensuring that every child involved in the system has access to the services and support they need to remain safe and achieve timely permanency in a loving, permanent family. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 977, because should another transition in our child welfare case provision occur – and it is our fervent hope, on behalf of the children and families receiving services in the Eastern Service Area (ESA), that the current contract will work well and there will not need to be further disruptive transitions – it is imperative to a smooth transition that a new contractor be absolutely ready on day one to provide the needed services and oversight required.

Research from the U.S. General Accounting Office indicates that transitions in case management affect children’s safety and permanency: staff shortages, high caseloads, and worker turnover impede progress toward achievement of safety and permanency outcomes.¹ Though this research was specific to caseworker retention and recruitment, from experience I can say that the damage of transitions occurs as much or more in transitions between agencies as in transitions between individual workers within an agency. I was a practicing defense attorney in the courtroom during the last major child welfare transition in the ESA, and I saw first-hand how my clients’ cases stagnated and suffered in the period of transition from one provider to another. Information was lost in translation between case managers and supervisory teams, supportive services had to be re-contracted, and hearings were set back in the confusion. I am hearing from people still working on the ground in the ESA right now, that cases are going through similar set-backs and even safety concerns. Without casting judgement on Saint Francis, it is simply a fact that children and families will inherently bear the costs of these types of system upheavals, and if we are going to have an outsourcing model of case management provision at all, the best we can do as a state is to ensure that any agency seeking to take the reigns is fully prepared to do so.

¹ United States General Accounting Office. *Report to Congressional Requesters: Child Welfare HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff.* GAO-03-357: March 2003. Available at: <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-03-357>

I'd like to thank Senator Bolz for bringing this important legislation and thank the Committee, as always, for all you do for Nebraska's children. I would respectfully urge you to advance LB 977 and would be happy to answer any questions.