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February 4, 2020

To: Chairman Stinner and Members of the Appropriations Committee
From: Juliet Summers, Policy Coordinator at Voices for Children in Nebraska
Re: LB 995 to appropriate funds to the Commission on Public Advocacy

Every child is entitled to due process and equal protection under the law. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 995, because it will ensure youth across our entire state have meaningful access to one of the great protections of the American justice system: the constitutional right to counsel. This constitutional imperative is especially important for children, who may by their age fail to fully understand the grave nature of their actions, the complicated legal proceedings against them, and the potentially life-altering outcomes.

As a strong supporter of Senator Pansing Brooks' LB 231, which would provide for early automatic appointment of counsel in juvenile proceedings statewide, Voices for Children recognizes the importance of incentivizing qualified attorneys to practice in all corners of our great state. Greater investment in the Rural Practice Loan Repayment Assistance program will provide additional incentive funds for lawyers who choose to practice in more rural jurisdictions in Nebraska.

In supporting LB 995, we wish to be clear that the data does *not support* a contention that juveniles are being refused counsel only in areas of the state where there are few or no practicing attorneys. Year after year, there are counties across the state with low numbers of registered attorneys but high rates of juvenile access to counsel. However, we recognize the challenge for a county where only one or two practicing attorneys reside – or where none reside, and appointments must be made from the next county over. This creates difficulties not just for a small county budget, but for the young person facing court proceedings who needs face-to-face contact with their attorney to help him understand what is happening in his case. A flourishing body of legal practitioners throughout the state, as imagined and incentivized by the Rural Practice program and LB 995, supports the aims of LB 231: ensuring excellent, qualified, universal access to legal counsel for youth and family throughout Nebraska, irrespective of geography.

I would like to thank Senator Gragert for sponsoring LB 995, and this Committee for your time and attention. I would respectfully urge you to advance and incorporate this fund into the legislative budget.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Summers". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Juliet Summers