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October 12, 2020

To: Chairman Hilgers and Members of the Executive Board

From: Juliet Summers, policy coordinator for child welfare and juvenile justice

Re: LB 1144 and LR 298

We all benefit from a juvenile justice system structured to ensure youth receive meaningful rehabilitative services and can grow into healthy adults. Every investment we make in our juvenile system is an opportunity: to set youth up for success, to improve lives and heal families, to keep communities safe, and to disrupt cycles of recidivism and incarceration that drive the overcrowding of our adult correctional system. This applies across the spectrum of our system response, from prevention and community interventions, all the way to commitment to the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers (YRTC) at Geneva and Kearney. Voices for Children supports both LB 1144 and LR 298 which are before you today, because each will ensure that crucial oversight and long-term planning occurs to protect young people involved in our juvenile justice system both currently and in future.

The crisis at Geneva that was brought to light this summer, and the ongoing uncertainty for the girls and boys placed at Kearney, are tragic and unacceptable. Conditions for children at a state-run facility should never reach a boiling point that requires surprise visits from members of the Legislature and sudden removals of youth for physical safety. We should not be okay with suicide attempts, hidden assaults, and children fleeing over the fence. Unfortunately, crises and critical incidents at the YRTCs are nothing new, as you can see from the thirty-year timeline I have attached to my testimony. If the YRTCs are going to continue to exist as a part of our juvenile justice system, Voices for Children believes that LB 1144 and LR 298 represent an important piece of the puzzle to ensure appropriate immediate and long-term legislative oversight of the facilities' operations and the Office of Juvenile Services' planning.

By requiring quarterly reporting to the Inspector General for Child Welfare of grievances within the facilities, and immediate reporting of any incidents of self-harm, attempted suicide, use of mechanical restraints, and significant medical events, LB 1144 will ensure that our state watch-dog for the welfare of children will receive timely notice when youth safety and well-being is threatened. By creating a special legislative committee for oversight of the YRTCs to create a report and recommendations and oversee longer-term planning, LR 298 will ensure that any next steps taken by the agency in this period of transition are made with the crucial external oversight and input of a separate branch of government. We have to do better for Nebraska youth.

I would like to thank Chairperson Howard and the Health & Human Services Committee for their dedicated work in creating their report and recommendations this fall from which LB 1144 and LR 298 have developed. Thank you also to this Board for your time and attention to these critically important issues. I would respectfully urge you to advance both the bill and resolution to the body for further debate.