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March 28, 2019

To: Chairman Stinner and the members of the Appropriations Committee
From: Juliet Summers, Policy Coordinator at Voices for Children in Nebraska
Re: **LB 226 – Appropriate funds to the Department of Health & Human Services**

We all benefit when our juvenile justice system is structured to ensure youth receive meaningful rehabilitative interventions so that they can grow into healthy adults. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 226, as an investment in the types of youth-focused interventions that benefit our state, and our state's bottom line, in the long-run.

Recognizing that this Committee has many priorities for funding this year, and **the two Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers already comprise \$20 million in annual spending¹**, if any further special investment is going to be made in the YRTC, LB 226 represents the best proposal for use of our precious general funds.

At an interim study hearing over the summer sponsored by Senator Lowe, staff and administration at the facility testified to the efforts they have made in recent years to implement more evidence-based programming, improve the staff-youth ratio, and ensure campus safety and security with a difficult population. These efforts are to be lauded, particularly since we have put them in a difficult situation by setting up our system to make the YRTCs our only no-eject, no-reject option in juvenile justice. We are asking the professionals at the YRTC to take too many kids with too many different, significant needs, in facilities that were not built to offer appropriate treatment capacity to serve each one individually. Funding for more mental health practitioners, more direct care staff to provide relief and the time to deepen their relationships with the youth, and more evidence-based programming will improve the experiences of youth and staff on campus to maximize positive outcomes, contributing to community safety through decreased recidivism.

I'd especially like to highlight the importance of the evaluation LB 226 proposes to fund. If these facilities are going to continue to exist in our juvenile spectrum, they need to be safe for youth, staff, and community alike, and produce the rehabilitative outcomes they are intended for. I came before this Committee recently to testify regarding the Community Based Juvenile Services Aid fund, a \$6.2 million annual grant fund created by the Legislature for diversionary programs, services, and placements. Every single program that receives even a dollar of that fund is evaluated by the University of Nebraska Omaha Juvenile Justice Institute on its outcomes, including future system involvement of participants (i.e. recidivism).

¹ Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services, Division of Child & Family Services. *Youth Rehabilitation & Treatment Center –Annual Reports*. SFY 2016-2017. Available at: For Kearney:

<http://dhhs.ne.gov/Reports/Youth%20Rehabilitation%20and%20Treatment%20Center%20Kearney%20Annual%20Report%20-%202016-2017.pdf>

For Geneva:

<http://dhhs.ne.gov/Reports/Youth%20Rehabilitation%20and%20Treatment%20Center%20Geneva%20Annual%20Report%20-%202016-2017.pdf>

In their evaluation report published in November 2018 for programs funded in 2016-2017, JJI evaluated 243 programs that served over 14,000 youth.² In FY 2016-217 the two YRTC facilities had a combined total of 172 youth admitted³, and we spend more than triple per year what we put into the CBA fund. Yet we have not in recent memory had an evaluation done of the short- or long-term outcomes these two facilities provide and the role they play in our rehabilitative juvenile justice system. **If we can evaluate every diversion program operating through a \$6.2 million annual fund serving 14,000 youth, we should evaluate two facilities costing our state over \$20 million annually serving fewer than 200 youth.**

I'd like to thank Senator Quick for bringing LB 226 and this Committee for your attention and care on these issues. For all the foregoing reasons, I would urge you to advance it and incorporate at least some portion of its priorities into your final report.

² Lindsey Wylie et al. *Evidence Based Nebraska: Annual Report FY 2016-2017*. University of Nebraska Omaha. Released November 2018. Available at: <https://www.unomaha.edu/college-of-public-affairs-and-community-service/juvenile-justice-institute/reports-and-publications/index.php>

³ *Id.*