February 11, 2021



7521 Main Street, Suite 103 Omaha, Nebraska 68127

(402) 597-3100

www.voicesforchildren.com

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Thank you, Chairperson Arch and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Julie Erickson and today I am representing Voices for Children in Nebraska as a proponent of LB 262.

All youth deserve access to ongoing support in maintaining safety, well-being, and stability. This is particularly important for young people exiting the system on the cusp of adulthood who have not found permanency in a lifelong family. Nebraska’s Bridge to Independence (B2I) program gives young people who have aged out of the foster care system the supports and services they need to successfully transition into adulthood. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 262 as it will allow non-lawfully permanent resident youth, to be eligible for the B2i program, including all its services and supports.

Transitioning into adulthood marks one of life’s most challenging transitions. Strong planning for education, employment, and basic needs is essential for all young people to transition successfully. Unfortunately, non-lawfully permanent resident youth often lack adequate support to address the underlying factors leading to a successful transition to adulthood and can find themselves completely alone, homeless, or lacking the supports needed to thrive. B2I’s employment/education requirement and provision of an Independence Coordinator constitute an essential safety net for youth moving towards successful adulthood. Additionally, B2I actively collaborates with community services to enhance the safety net and match the youth with long-term community connections, which further reduces the potential for future criminal justice involvement. With this eligibility expansion, LB 262 allows for unconnected youth to gain access to supports that are critically important to development.

Every young person, regardless of immigration status, has the right to experience emerging adulthood and successfully transition to adulthood with equitable access to opportunity. Systems must proactively develop prevention and intervention strategies that promote equity while mitigating implicit and explicit racial bias. When the Legislature passed LB 216 in 2013 creating the Bridge to Independence (b2i) program, it required that the continued examination and reporting of ways to extend the program to other populations in need of similar transitional supports. LB 262 presents an opportunity for us to do right by Nebraska youth as originally intended.

I’d like to thank this Committee for all your time and commitment to ensuring our systems serve and protect Nebraska’s vulnerable populations, and to thank Senator Vargas for his continued dedication to Nebraska’s young people.