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Thank you Chairperson Stinner and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Julie Erickson and I am here today on behalf of Voices for Children in Nebraska in opposition of LB 353.

After decades of punitive policies, the unsustainably high cost of mass incarceration has come to a head in recent years across the country and states have begun to undertake criminal justice reforms. Voices for Children in Nebraska opposes LB 353 as we don’t believe construction of a new corrections facility is best for families and communities in Nebraska. It’s clear that the impact of mass incarceration is much more widespread than the confines of jails and prisons—there are tremendous burdens, oftentimes unseen, that children and families experience when a loved one in incarcerated.

Our collective goal should be to keep people out of prisons, so building another one should not be the solution. There have been many senators in this legislative body introducing bills that would support alternatives to new prisons to help alleviate overcrowding, understaffing, and other issues within the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (NDCS). We know that appropriating tax dollars to build a new prison is not a solution to meet that goal.

We also run into the issue that the building of a new facility or expansion of the current ones will not be completed for a few years. We are already operating in crisis mode and need to look at other options that can immediately attend to the problem at hand. There are many things that funding can be allotted for outside the building of a new facility or expansion of a current one. We continue to advocate for the expansion of community supervision and funding for mental and behavioral health services.

Further, construction of a new corrections facility can have detrimental effects on children and communities, particularly communities of color. Extensive research on child development suggests that children unequivocally pay the price for decades of punitive policies in our criminal justice system. The loss of a parent to incarceration sets off a domino effect of instability and trauma, which can manifest in antisocial behavior, poor educational performance, and decreased physical and mental health.The cumulative effect of such stress and burden on children oftentimes leads to maladaptive behaviors and coping mechanisms that can bring children to their own interactions with the justice system.

If we are truly about decreasing our incarcerated population and lowering recidivism, appropriating more funds towards mental health and substance use services, job programs, diversion courts, housing and other pre-incarceration and post-incarceration needs would provide longer term solutions to the problem instead of new prison band aids.

We ask that LB 353 not be voted out of committee, but for legislators to look at other alternatives to decreasing the population of Nebraska state prisons through other methods. Thank you.