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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 I am here today on behalf of Voices for Children in Nebraska in support of LB 491.

Children are the future of Nebraska, and our state policies and decisions should ensure every child has the opportunity to meet his or her potential. Our child welfare system is a crucial aspect of child well-being, serving the most vulnerable children, who have already been subjected to trauma, abuse, or neglect. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 491 which would terminate the Department of Health and Human Services’ (DHHS) authority to contract with another entity for child welfare case management.

Nebraska’s children and families deserve a strong and stable child welfare system, regardless of where they live in the state. DHHS, as the legal parent of children in foster care, has the fundamental responsibility to provide equal access to care, treatment, and services to children across the state. In 2009, DHHS attempted to privatize all child welfare case management services statewide, ending with significant disruption to the system when all but one of the private entities withdrew or were terminated from their contracts. In response, in 2012, the Nebraska Legislature forbid privatization in the state, but carved out an exception permitting the remaining contract in the Eastern Service Area, held by PromiseShip, to continue as a “pilot” project with ongoing evaluations and legislative oversight. In June 2019, DHHS awarded the contract to an out-of-state entity, Saint Francis Ministries. In recent months and weeks, numerous allegations of mismanagement of funds and mistreatment of children in the care of St. Francis have emerged. It is concerning that the state has continued financial commitment to an agency that has shown a disregard for providing the kind of high-quality services that our children deserve.

Saint Francis Ministries had failed to comply with several aspects of the RFP including caseload sizes proposed; Nebraska corporate status and required percent of resident board members; maximum allowable percent of direct service provision; transportation service requirements; identification of subcontract providers; and full, audited financial statements. Further, there has been significant and ongoing media coverage about services being provided in Kansas including unlawful housing of state wards in St. Francis offices; failure to comply with Kansas’ required caseload standards; repeated requests for cost increase amendments; and legislative intervention and oversight due to the above concerns.

We attest, without undue drama, that children’s lives are in the balance. Every time there is uncertainty, negative publicity and inadequate resources, vulnerable children and at-risk families are harmed. The solution we are seeking with LB 491 is for case management in the Eastern Service Area, made up of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, to return to the state, which is currently managing the system in the 91 other counties. Our core values as a state are centered on ensuring all children and families are safe and healthy. We hope that the agency officials, private organizations, and the legislative body will come to the table to end child welfare privatization in Nebraska.

Voices for Children thanks Senator Cavanaugh for her ongoing commitment to children and the committee for having the leadership to consider this important legislation so that Nebraska can begin to better serve our most vulnerable children and families. We urge you to advance LB 491. Thank you.