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Thank you Chairperson Hughes and members of the Executive Board. My name is Julie Erickson and I am here today on behalf of Voices for Children in Nebraska in support of LR 29.

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 strongly supports LR 29, which would create a special legislative investigative and oversight committee to study the quality of care and staffing issues of the contractor, Saint Francis Ministries.

Legislative oversight and involvement are a necessary piece of successfully operating our child welfare system in the best interest of children and families. Since 2009, the child welfare reform effort has included increasing privatization of services. While Voices for Children believes that private entities can provide excellent services, we remain concerned about the ongoing commitment to the partnership with 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.

We attest, without undue drama, that children’s lives are in the balance. LR 29 is a step to providing clear checks and balances and performance oversight, both internally and externally. LR 29 lays the groundwork for more transparency on Saint Francis’ interactions with families, children, Nebraska courts, and with DHHS. It also allows for a better assessment of placement and quality of care received by the children of the Eastern Service Area through the contract services agreement with Saint Francis Ministries; a review of the financial costs to the state and their correlation with outcomes; and legislative action that will support child welfare reform going forward.

Voices for Children thanks Senator Cavanaugh for her ongoing commitment to children and the committee for having the leadership to consider this important resolution so that Nebraska can better understand how to serve our most vulnerable children and families and take necessary steps to make reform meaningful and lasting.