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 *Executive DIrector*

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 LB 657.

We find ourselves in the midst of an important reckoning in our country. The violent legacy of racial injustice has caught up to us, and a resistance movement, led in large part by young people demanding the dismantling of white supremacy in the United States, has emerged. Undoing centuries of institutionalized harm requires us to refocus the lens with which we view policy decisions and how they impact communities of color. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 657 as racial impact statements have emerged as a potential legislative tool for our collective reimagining of the policy process.

Racial impact statements are meant to inform legislators of the effects of bills on communities of color and other marginalized communities so that they can take steps to avoid increasing disparities. To fully inform legislators and the electorate on the effect of legislation, it is imperative that racial impact statements are available to all stakeholders as early in the legislative process as possible.

Our state systems should be structured to ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to grow up safe, healthy, and valued, and the state’s response to a youth accused of a crime should not be dictated, explicitly or implicitly, by a child or family’s race or ethnicity. However, both in Nebraska and nationally, the data suggest disparate treatment occurs throughout our juvenile justice system, with youth of color experiencing far different outcomes than their White peers for similar infractions. From the moment of arrest and the decision whether to divert, the disparities between Nebraska kids based on race and ethnicity grow larger the deeper we move deeper through the juvenile justice system. The data is clear that we haven’t gotten it right yet, and that, in fact, reforms to improve our systems have tended to increase rather than decrease disparities in outcome for kids of color: the benefits of reforms have largely been felt by white, non-Hispanic youth.

At Voices for Children, we are dedicated to transforming our country’s treatment of young people who interact with the law and welcome LB 657 as an opportunity to get serious about the racial inequities that lead to youth of color being disproportionately profiled, over policed, more harshly punished and left with a lasting legacy of racial trauma.

Voices for Children supports LB 657 as it pertains to juvenile justice, because it would provide an opportunity for the legislature to consider potential disparate impacts of proposed legislation on minority youth whenever a bill is brought to change or reform our juvenile justice system. Fully implemented as intended, racial impact statements can be a critical tool for addressing racial disparities in America’s criminal and juvenile systems. The racial impact statement could be a launching pad for informed discussion around the disparate impacts of proposed legislation, and the potential effects – positive or negative – on communities that have historically experienced the worst of our systems.

Voices for Children thanks Senator Vargas for his ongoing commitment to racial equity and the committee for having the leadership to consider this important legislation. I urge you to advance LB 657. Thank you.