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February 3, 2023

To: Chairman Briese and Members of the Executive Board

From: Spike Eickholt, lobbyist for Voices for Children in Nebraska

Re: Support for LB 215

Nebraska children deserve systems that respond to their risks and needs thoughtfully and with care, keeping them safe while allowing them to grow into healthy and adjusted adults. At Voices for Children in Nebraska, we have seen over the decades how our state agency leadership – both at the Department of Health and Human Services and in the Administrative Office of the Courts – is deeply committed to these goals and the children they serve.

At the same time, the stakes for each individual child served are too high, and external checks are not only beneficial but necessary to prevent against human error, potential abuses, and systemic flaws that require correction. Voices for Children in Nebraska strongly supports the Office of the Inspector General for Child Welfare (“OIG”), and LB 215 provides overdue statutory clarification and clean-up with regard to the role, scope, purpose, and responsibilities of the OIG.

We believe, without undue drama, that children’s lives are in the balance. When children are placed in the care of the state, even with the best of intentions and all the efforts in the world, things can go wrong: sometimes with tragic consequences. It is our duty, as the adults with responsibility, to take every measure to ensure that those tragic consequences do not repeat themselves. The OIG plays a critical role in doing so, by investigating when a child has died or been seriously injured in state care, or when someone has had such a traumatic experience they have chosen to speak up and make a complaint. An external watchdog, the OIG is positioned to identify patterns and make systemic recommendations to avoid future, similar events. These recommendations do not come with any unconstitutional mandating authority to require the agencies to complete them; rather, the only goal is to identify, report upon, and overcome flaws in the system to ensure no other child experiences the same tragedy.

LB 215 will clarify statutory authority for the OIG’s investigations, to ensure they are able to carry out their unenviable but vital role. At Voices for Children in Nebraska, we support this authority, because when it comes to the safety of our state’s children, our agencies should have nothing to hide and everything to gain from open investigation. When tragedy strikes, our children deserve nothing less than our best efforts to safeguard against future harm.

We thank Chairman Briese for bringing this bill, and would respectfully urge the Executive Board to advance it.