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February 22, 2023

To: Chairperson Wayne and Members of the Judiciary Committee  
From: Anahí Salazar, Policy Coordinator for Voices for Children in Nebraska  
**RE: Support for LB 271, to change reporting requirements for child abuse and neglect**

Our child protective system should be structured to ensure a timely and appropriate response when abuse or neglect is suspected. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 271, because our current system of universal mandatory reporting is inefficient and leads to erroneous reporting, which can be particularly harmful to children and communities in poverty.

As of 2019, 47 states designate certain professions whose members are required by law to report suspected child abuse or neglect. However, only 18 states and Puerto Rico mandate *all* persons to report.<sup>1</sup> The rationale for having all people be mandated reporters is to cast a wide net, ideally protecting every child. Unfortunately, what occurs instead is that our child abuse and neglect hotline is inundated with calls, many or most of which need to be screened out in order to find the reports where children are actually at risk. **In Nebraska in 2021, there were 36,393 calls to the hotline reporting suspected child abuse or neglect. Of these, 18,292 or just over 50%, were screened out for not meeting the threshold. 2,881 contained no allegation of abuse or neglect. Of the 18,101 that were accepted, only 2,080 ended up being substantiated. An additional 4,080 were referred to Alternative Response for voluntary services.**<sup>2</sup>

Universal mandatory reporting, with its high number of calls that must be screened out, is linked with delays in investigation as intake workers have too much information to sift through.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, because neglect and poverty are distinct but intertwined, populations which experience poverty at higher rates – such as rural Nebraskans and Nebraskans of color – are frequently overreported, leading to over-policing and communities fractured by a system initially intended to help rather than harm.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2019). Mandatory reporters of child abuse and neglect. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/lawsandpolicies/statutes/manda/>

<sup>2</sup> *Child Abuse and Neglect Annual Data, 2021*. Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. Released 2022. Available at <https://dhhs.ne.gov/Reports/Child%20Abuse%20and%20Neglect%20Annual%20Report%202021.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> For instance, in our 2019 report, *Equality Before the Law: Race & Ethnicity in the Front End of Nebraska's Child Welfare System*, Voices for Children analyzed reporting data and discovered the time between report and investigation in Nebraska averaged five days - nearly double the national average. Available at <https://voicesforchildren.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/RED-data-snapshot-1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> *Poverty and Child Neglect: How Did We Get It Wrong?* National Conference of State Legislatures: February 2023. Available at <https://www.ncsl.org/resources/details/poverty-and-child-neglect-how-did-we-get-it-wrong>

LB 271 articulates a better approach: professionals in positions likely to encounter child abuse or neglect remain mandated reporters, and must undergo training to understand what to look for, what to report, and how to respond. Nothing in the bill prevents other concerned citizens from continuing to call the hotline if they see something, but by removing statutory penalties for failure to do so, our Department intake teams should receive fewer erroneous calls to screen out. Easing this pressure on the front end of our system can allow for timelier investigations of accepted reports, and reduce disparities by rurality and race and ethnicity in intake.

For all these reasons, we thank Senator McKinney for bringing this bill and thank the Committee for considering this important matter. We respectfully urge you to advance LB 231.