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To: Chairperson Hardin and members of the Health and Human Services Committee

From: Anahí Salazar, policy coordinator for Voices for Children in Nebraska

Re: LB 181, Provide for benefits under the Young Adult Bridge to Independence Act for young adults not lawfully present in the United States

For young people transitioning out of our child welfare and juvenile justice systems into adulthood, the abrupt shift from structured support to complete independence can be an incredibly difficult path to navigate. Many of these young adults have endured significant trauma and lack the familial safety nets that others their age rely on. Without adequate support, they face higher risks of dropping out of school, struggling with vocational goals, experiencing economic hardship, suffering from poor physical and mental health, and becoming involved in the adult correctional system.

Nebraska has made meaningful strides in supporting young adults aging out of foster care through the Bridge to Independence program. B2I offers essential resources, including Medicaid coverage and case management, to help with post-secondary education, vocational training, employment, housing, and other crucial life skills until the age of 21. In addition, and maybe most impactful, the program can provide connections to caring adults, emotional support, and mentorship.

Unfortunately, current eligibility requirements for Nebraska's B2I program excludes some of the most vulnerable youth due to their immigration status. According to the Children's Commission, 16 to 52 non-citizen young people age out of foster care in Nebraska each year and lack access to the vital program.¹ LB 181 seeks to close this gap by ensuring that all young people in Nebraska, regardless of their background, can access this vital support that promotes stability and success.

Every young person deserves a fair chance to transition into adulthood with the resources they need to thrive. By expanding B2I eligibility, Nebraska can continue its commitment to supporting all system-involved youth, ensuring their successful path to productive and healthy adulthood—ultimately strengthening our communities and Nebraska as a whole.

I want to extend my gratitude to this Committee for your time and commitment to protecting Nebraska's vulnerable populations, and to Senator Cavanaugh for her unwavering dedication to Nebraska's young people. I respectfully urge you to advance LB 181 to provide these critical supports to all young adults who need them.

Thank you for your time and consideration.