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

From: Katie Nungesser, Policy Coordinator for Voices for Children in Nebraska

RE: Support LB 217, Require suicide awareness and prevention training for employees of child-placing agencies and child welfare workers

Every child deserves the opportunity to lead a healthy, secure, fulfilling life and to grow to adulthood. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 217, a crucial piece of legislation that addresses the pressing need for suicide awareness and prevention training within state agencies responsible for placing children in out-of-home placements. We believe that this bill is a vital step towards safeguarding the emotional health and physical well-being of our vulnerable youth.

Children involved in the child welfare system face unique challenges and many have had adverse life experiences and disruptions in their support systems and relationships. It is critical that those entrusted with their care are equipped to recognize the warning signs of suicide and respond effectively. The alarming statistic that children placed outside their homes and into state care are three times more likely to attempt suicide underscores the urgency of addressing this issue¹. LB 217 recognizes the heightened risk these children face and aims to equip adults in their lives with the necessary tools to provide a safe and supportive environment.

The statistics regarding youth mental health in Nebraska are deeply concerning, with over 20% of youth diagnosed with a mental health condition in 2021, and only 62% of those in need receiving treatment. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10-24 in Nebraska, and the disparities among ethnic groups, particularly Hispanic youth, are alarming.² These figures demand urgent and comprehensive action.

The impact of suicide reaches far beyond the individual, affecting families, friends, teachers, mental health professionals, and our communities at large. To combat this devastating trend, we must invest in targeted efforts for prevention, education, and clinical services, while simultaneously working towards reducing the stigma associated with mental health.

By fostering open discussions, providing training, and promoting education on suicide awareness, we can dismantle stereotypes and myths surrounding mental health issues. It is our firm belief that efforts such as the training in this bill will empower individuals to engage in tough conversations, offer meaningful support, and ultimately contribute to the reduction of suicide rates among our youth.

Suicide prevention training for state agencies is not just a responsibility; it is a necessity to protect the lives of our most vulnerable youth. It is important to emphasize that suicide is a preventable public health problem. Until we make suicide prevention everyone's responsibility, we will continue to lose young people in Nebraska.



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We urge this committee to take action to strengthen suicide prevention efforts within our child welfare system. Thank you, Senator Fredrickson, for continuing to shed light on this issue and standing up for the well-being of Nebraska's youth.

Respectfully, Katie Nungesser

1 Inspector General of Nebraska Child Welfare. Report of Investigation Death by Suicide. 25 July 2023, https://nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/108/PDF/Agencies/Inspector_General_of_Nebraska_Child_Welfare/809_20230725-155459.pdf.

2 "Leading Causes of Death and Injury." Cdc.gov, 8 Nov. 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/LeadingCauses.html>.