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To: Chairperson Kauth and members of the Business and Labor Committee
From: Katie Nungesser, policy coordinator for Voices for Children in Nebraska
Re: LB 45, Provide for grants for job programs for historically underserved youth

When we invest in young people, we invest in our collective future. Youth need opportunities to build skills and develop their interests to pursue their educational and vocational dreams. These types of opportunities are especially important for historically underserved youth, who may have experienced poverty, homelessness, or other adverse childhood experiences that undercut their ability to break out of generational cycles. Voices for Children supports LB 45, because it represents a proactive step to support young people in our state who have big dreams and so much to offer, but may be missing the resources they need to make those dreams a reality.

Investing in youth jobs programs is economic and workforce development. I do not need to tell this Committee that Nebraska's unemployment rate is one of the lowest in the nation, coming in at just 2.6% in December 2024.¹ Employers are crying out for more trained workers, especially in high-demand fields such as health care and skilled trades. Targeted programs to bring more young people into these fields will foster Nebraska's continued economic growth.

Investing in youth jobs programs is crime prevention. Voices for Children in Nebraska has a long history of advocating in the space of youth justice, and the research is clear: "at-risk" young people, an ill-defined category which frequently overlaps with the historically underserved population LB 45 describes, need stairways to opportunity. Programs like the ones that would be funded by this grant program allow young people who may be at risk of justice system involvement to see a different future and develop the necessary skills to pursue it – importantly, while receiving compensation that allows them to participate. Young people growing up in poverty do not have leisure to participate in unpaid internships and may experience additional barriers to participation. A jobs program that is committed to meeting youth where they are, teaches a valuable skill while paying a wage, and evaluates for success is a proactive investment in community safety and generational well-being.

For all these reasons, we would like to thank Senator McKinney for bringing LB 45, and would respectfully urge the Committee to advance it.

¹ Data from the Nebraska Department of Labor, 2024 Workforce Trends.