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February 17, 2025

To: Chairman Hansen and Members of the Executive Board

From: Juliet Summers, Executive Director, Voices for Children in Nebraska

RE: Support for LB 298, to Provide for the Division of Legislative Oversight, the Director of Legislative Oversight, and the Legislative Oversight Committee and change provisions relating to the Public Counsel, the office of Inspector General of Nebraska Child Welfare, and the office of Inspector General of the Nebraska Correctional System

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. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 298, because we believe that the watchdog offices addressed in the bill are both necessary and already constitutional. As a child advocacy organization, we are particularly focused on the Office of the Inspector General for Child Welfare ("OIG"), and we do not oppose the bill's clarifications with regard to that office's role, scope, purpose, and responsibilities. We believe it is very important that the OIG be empowered to investigate and make recommendations for systemic improvement for both child welfare cases with the Department of Health and Human Services *and* juvenile justice cases with the Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation.

At Voices for Children in Nebraska, we have seen over the decades how all three branches of government are deeply committed to the children of our state. Agency leadership at both DHHS and Juvenile Probation are dedicated to providing a high level of care and have frequently been partners at the table in reforming how our state responds to children and families in crisis. At the same time, the stakes for each individual child served within these systems 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. The Ombudsman and the OIG serve a critical purpose in this regard.

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. Over the years, the OIG's investigations



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and reports upon juvenile room confinement, sexual abuse of children in foster care, the health and safety crisis at the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center at Geneva, and more have been critical in drawing attention to harms experienced by Nebraska children. As an external watchdog, the OIG is positioned to identify patterns and make systemic recommendations to avoid future, similar events.

At Voices for Children in Nebraska, we support the statutory authority granted to the OIG, 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 and recommendation. When tragedy strikes, our children deserve nothing less than our best efforts to safeguard against future harm.

We thank Speaker Arch for his leadership in addressing this issue, and respectfully urge you to advance LB 298.

Sincerely,

Juliet Summers