



March 13, 2025

To: Chairperson Bosn and members of the Judiciary Committee

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

**Re: Opposition to LB 556, Change jurisdiction of juvenile courts and adult criminal courts and change provisions relating to detention and hearings under the Nebraska Juvenile Code**

Our justice system should hold young people accountable in evidence-based ways that allow them to grow into healthy adults and promote community safety. Voices for Children in Nebraska opposes LB 556 as a measure that would walk back years of meaningful progress that has kept our youth and our communities safer.

Along with my testimony, you are each receiving a handout with some state-level statistics, as well as district-specific data provided by the Crime Commission, showing juvenile arrests for your counties from 2000-2023, the most recent available year. Your fact sheet shows which law enforcement agencies are included in this reporting to the Crime Commission, and notes if there are any gaps in that reporting. You will see that **juvenile crime in Nebraska has fallen significantly since the early 2000s, when juvenile justice reform first began to take root.** Meanwhile, when breaking out violent offenses, we see that consistently over the past twenty years, **the number of youth committing the most violent acts has remained relatively steady and represents an extremely small fraction of all crimes committed by youth.**

You have heard plenty of stories this session, really sad and scary cases. I am not here to discount those stories or the real harms committed. We should work together to find the right way to address that tiny fraction of youth still committing violent crimes in our state. But the simple, actual fact of the matter is youth crime – including violent crime – is *not* spiking. On the contrary: the numbers gathered and reported by our law enforcement agencies clearly show that bipartisan, measured reform of our juvenile justice system over the past decades has made Nebraskans *more* safe, not less.

The reason why is that Nebraska has been pragmatic about responding to youth offending in ways that mitigate the likelihood of recidivism. One of those ways was by reducing the use of detention and secure confinement for young people who aren't an immediate danger to community safety. Overreliance on detention for low or medium risk youth exposes them to sexual and physical harm, cuts them off from family, church, sports, and other pro-social activities, makes them less likely to graduate, more likely to associate with more dangerous

peers, more likely to experience ill effects of mental health diagnosis, more likely to recidivate ... and the list goes on.<sup>1</sup> Another decision made was to right-size our use of criminal prosecution, moving more youth into juvenile court rather than criminal court proceedings where they could access diversion, rehabilitative services, and appropriate accountability interventions.

Nebraska lawmakers sitting in those very chairs effectively prevented many crimes through a pragmatic approach to youth offending. And in addition to harm prevented to victims, they saved our counties and our state taxpayers significant money, because incarceration is also by far the costliest response to youth crime, dollar for dollar. There is a reason the Platte Institute supported these reforms when they were initiated, writing:

*Each reform can play a significant role in ensuring that Nebraska's juvenile justice system does not become bigger, but rather becomes better and less of a burden on taxpayers. But far more importantly, each reform is keyed towards reducing the number of career criminals in the state, increasing rehabilitation amongst Nebraska's troubled youth, and resulting in safer streets for all.<sup>2</sup>*

If LB 556 is intended to prevent violent crime, it is a massive overcorrection that would unfortunately backfire on all these outcomes. Allowing detention for younger children, for young people who have not committed violent acts but have run from home or placement, and for youth who have threatened harm to self, will increase youth offending over the longer term. Allowing criminal charging of younger children – as well as increasing the number of older youth prosecuted in adult court on lower level offenses – will mean longer court processes, more time spent in detention, and fewer youth in evidence-based rehabilitative interventions that are where real community safety is achieved. And it would do all this while inflating county and state budgets at Nebraska taxpayer expense.

I have had the opportunity to speak with Senator Riepe regarding our concerns, and I believe we share the same goal: a Nebraska with strong communities, where every young person gets what they need to grow up healthy, safe, and connected. With respect, LB 556 is not that bill, and I would respectfully urge the Committee not to advance it.

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<sup>1</sup> See, .e.g, Walker et al. *The Impact of Pretrial Juvenile Detention on 12-Month Recidivism: A Matched-Comparison Study*. *Crime & Delinquency*, Volume 66, Issue 13-14: 2020. Accessed at:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0011128720926115>

<sup>2</sup> Platte Institute for Economic Research. *Right-Sizing the Cornhusker State's Juvenile Justice System*. December 2012. Accessed at:

[https://files.platteinstitute.org/uploads/2020/05/20130108\\_Juvenile\\_Justice\\_Report\\_UPDATE.pdf](https://files.platteinstitute.org/uploads/2020/05/20130108_Juvenile_Justice_Report_UPDATE.pdf)