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

From: Katie Nungeser, policy coordinator for Voices for Children in Nebraska

Re: LB 845, Eliminate, rename, and change provisions relating to committees and councils administered by the Department of Health and Human Services

Voices for Children in Nebraska in opposition to LB 845 and specifically the elimination of the Alternative Response Advisory Committee within the Nebraska Children's Commission. Voices for Children is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to improving the well-being of Nebraska's children through research, policy analysis, and advocacy grounded in data and lived experience. Our work is guided by the belief that keeping children safe is essential to their healthy development and that children deserve to grow up in safe, permanent, and loving homes. We support a child welfare system that strengthens families, minimizes trauma, and connects caregivers to evidence-based, community driven services that meet families where they are.

LB 845 would eliminate the Alternative Response Advisory Committee which plays a critical role in protecting children involved in reports of abuse and neglect that are handled outside of the court system. The committee examines the Department of Health and Human Services' use of alternative response and makes recommendations to the Legislature, the Department, and the Children's Commission regarding the receipt and screening of abuse and neglect reports, the ongoing use of alternative response, the ongoing use of traditional response, and the provision of services in non-court involved cases. The committee's work is focused on ensuring child safety, reducing the risk of future abuse or neglect, and meaningfully engaging families.

According to data provided by the Department of Health and Human Services for the 2024 Kids Count in Nebraska Report, in 2023 alone there were 5,049 families served by alternative response in Nebraska¹. That means thousands of children and families each year are being served through a pathway that does not involve the courts but still requires careful screening, appropriate services, and continuous monitoring to ensure safety.

In Nebraska, alternative response is designed to focus on family support rather than punishment. It connects families to services such as parenting education, mental health supports, and other community-based resources instead of placing parents on the central registry or removing children from their homes. Reports are reviewed through a RED Team assessment, which evaluates severity, child vulnerability, parental cooperation, and protective factors to determine whether a case qualifies. Certain exclusionary criteria, including

domestic violence or significant substance use, prevent cases from being routed to alternative response.

When implemented correctly, alternative response has demonstrated positive outcomes for both children and families. DHHS has reported that parents involved in alternative response experienced greater knowledge of effective parenting and child development, as well as an improved understanding of children's social and emotional competence by the conclusion of their cases. Children in alternative response cases showed improvements in emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, and conduct related challenges².

Compared to traditional response cases, children involved in alternative response experienced significantly fewer subsequent out-of-home placements. DHHS caseworkers also reported greater improvements for alternative response families in meeting education, transportation, and material needs. Families served through alternative response were more than twice as likely to receive services, accessed a wider variety of supports including increased access to mental health services, and reported higher satisfaction with their experience with DHHS. Families consistently reported being better off after receiving services.

These outcomes show that alternative response can be an effective approach when it is implemented with appropriate screening, meaningful services, and continuous oversight. Ongoing evaluation is essential to ensure these positive results are sustained and that children remain safe.

In 2025, the Nebraska Office of Inspector General of Child Welfare recommended increased tracking and evaluation of alternative response cases. Eliminating the advisory committee moves the state in the opposite direction by reducing transparency, limiting data driven review, and removing one of the only formal mechanisms for cross system accountability in non-court involved cases.

Oversight is not bureaucracy. It is a safeguard for children. Eliminating the Alternative Response Advisory Committee weakens accountability in a system serving thousands of Nebraska children each year and increases the risk that serious concerns go unaddressed until harm occurs.

Let us recognize the instrumental role this committee plays in promoting inclusivity, accountability, and community engagement. Instead of dismantling these structures, let us explore ways to enhance their effectiveness and ensure they continue to serve as powerful instruments for positive change.

For these reasons, I urge the committee to reject the elimination of the Alternative Response Advisory Committee and maintain this critical protection for Nebraska's children and families.