

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office  
Health and Human Services Committee February 9, 2022

**ARCH:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is John Arch. I represent the 14th Legislative District in Sarpy County and I serve as Chair of the HHS Committee. I'd like to invite the members of the committee to introduce themselves starting on my right-- pause-- with Senator Day.

**DAY:** Good afternoon, I am Senator Jen Day, represent Legislative District 49 in Sar-- in Sarpy County. Excuse me.

**MURMAN:** Hello, I'm Senator Dave Murman from District 38, and I represent seven counties and part of an eighth in the southern part of the state, right south of the middle part of the state.

**WALZ:** Hi, my name is Lynne Walz, and I represent Legislative District 15, which is all of Dodge County and part of Valley.

**WILLIAMS:** Matt Williams from Gothenburg, Legislative District 36.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Machaela Cavanaugh, District 6, west central Omaha, Douglas County.

**ARCH:** Also assisting the committee is one of our legal counsels, Paul Henderson; our committee clerk, Geri Williams; and our committee pages, Savana and Aleks. A few notes about our policies and procedures. Please-- first, please turn off or silence your cell phones. This afternoon, we'll be hearing two bills and will be taking them in the order listed on the agenda outside the room. The hearing on each bill will begin with the introducer's opening statement. After the opening statement, we will hear from supporters of the bill, then from those in opposition, followed by those speaking in a neutral capacity. The introducer of the bill will then be given the opportunity to make closing statements if they wish to do so. For those of you who are planning to testify, you will find green testifier sheets on the table near the entrance of the hearing room. Please fill one out and hand it to one of the pages when you come up to testify. This will help us keep an accurate record of the hearing. When you come up to testify, please begin by stating your name clearly into the microphone and please spell both your first and last name. We use a light system for testifying. Each testifier will have five minutes to testify. When you begin, the light will be green. When the light turns yellow, that means you have one minute left. When the light turns red, it is time to end your testimony and the trap door opens and we will ask you to wrap up your final thoughts. If you wish to appear on the committee statement as having a position on one of

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the bills before us today, you must testify. If you simply want to be part of the official record of the hearing, you may submit written comments for the record online via the Chamber Viewer page for each bill. These comments must be submitted prior to noon on the workday before the hearing in order to be included in the official record. Additionally, there is a white sign-in sheet at the entrance where you may leave your name and position on the bills before us today. With that, we will begin today's hearing with LB1113. Welcome, Senator McKinney.

**McKINNEY:** Good afternoon, Chairman Arch and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. LB1113 acknowledges that the state and local governments have a significant interest in deciding how to best assist low-income people facing hardship because of the pandemic and economic downturn. A vulnerable group within this class are individuals who age out of foster care in the Bridge to Independence program in Nebraska. Under this bill, the Department of Health and Human Services will be required to provide \$1,000 monthly unconditional transfer to individuals who age out of the Bridge to Independence program who will be 21-years-old before December 31, 2024. Those individuals will be eligible for the pilot project and will receive this until December 31, 2026. This eligibility will apply without regards to age of that individual entered into the program. When this concern regarding youth-- regarding foster care youth was brought to my attention, it was immediately conceivable to me prior to any research that the pandemic would have a disparate impact on a foster youth and youth aging out of foster care system. Because like many marginalized groups, they start their adulthood behind from an, from an equitable standpoint. We all know that the impact of the pandemic has had on financial stability, mental health, job security, housing, and food insecurity. It didn't strike me as odd that these things would be exacerbated when concerning young people aging out of the foster care system. What I find in research, however, put this position-- what I found in research, however, put this notion into concrete data. A survey conducted by the University of Oregon Center for Equity Promotion stated that the already existing financial worries of youth aging out of foster care took a big jump. Pre-pandemic, nearly 45, 45 percent were moderately or extremely concerned about their financial stability and ability to thrive, compared with more than 61 percent on the public health and economic crisis took-- as it took hold. When asked whether they brought-- when asked whether they thought their finances would have improved a year after the pandemic ended, there was little optimism. This notion is not far fetched from Nebraska. As much as we would like it, like it to be and as much as we pretend it

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is, the COVID-19, the COVID-19 pandemic is not over. The impacts are just as vast as they were in March of 2020. Even if the pandemic were not a factor in this discussion, we must do something to address the foster care pipeline in general. Youth leaving foster care face homelessness, no resources in the lack of case management and professional support, and the lack thereof affects the likelihood that they will be self-sufficient. Pulling the rug from under you by not granting them protections is irresponsible as a state. I think it's, it's important and vital for the vitality of our state and the future of our state to provide as much stability and opportunity for youth, especially youth aging out of foster care because they have dealt with so much throughout life. And my experience coming up and to have a family in and out of the system, and even as a coach, I've grown to get a greater understanding that individuals that go through the foster care system, we just cannot throw them to the wolves once they turn 18 or 19. I think as a state, we should try to provide as much support as possible until they're able to sufficiently take care of themselves. I would say to the age of 25, but some may argue maybe not. But I, I think this is important and we have a great opportunity to take advantage of this situation because of the resources that were handed out to our state from the federal government, from the, from the federal government from the American Rescue Plan Act. And with that, I'll take any questions.

**ARCH:** Thank you, Senator McKinney. Are there any questions? Senator Cavanaugh.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Thank you. Thank you, Senator McKinney. In looking at the fiscal note, and I don't know if the department is here or not, but I'm looking at the department's portion of the fiscal note and the number of positions that they would have to add. Did they give you an explanation on that?

**McKINNEY:** No, I didn't get an explanation on that.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** OK.

**McKINNEY:** Yeah, I--

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Because when I read the text about it, it says that they would hire people to inform the, the youth about what it means to participate in the program. It doesn't seem like you would need that many people.

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**McKINNEY:** I didn't think so either. I think if we already had the Bridge to Independence program,--

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Right.

**McKINNEY:** --and we already know-- it should be a seamless process to say who and who cannot get \$1,000. I, I don't think you need to hire a bunch, a bunch more staff if we're already doing-- if the program was already-- it would be different if we were creating a whole new program. I maybe could understand, but since we're not creating another program, I don't see why we-- why the need is what, what they're stating.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Yeah.

**McKINNEY:** Maybe they can explain if they're here.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Maybe.

**McKINNEY:** But--

**M. CAVANAUGH:** If they are here, I will definitely ask them. Thank you.

**McKINNEY:** No problem.

**ARCH:** Other questions? I just have one. And that is your, your intention for this \$1,000 would be to go to the individual, whether they-- whatever their employment status is. Is that, is that correct?

**McKINNEY:** Yes.

**ARCH:** OK.

**McKINNEY:** Yeah.

**ARCH:** All right. Thank you.

**McKINNEY:** No problem.

**ARCH:** Seeing no other questions, thank you very much. Will you be staying for close?

**McKINNEY:** Yes.

**ARCH:** OK, thank you. We'll now invite the first proponent for LB1113. Welcome.

**SCHALISHA WALKER:** Hello.

**ARCH:** You can begin anytime you'd like.

**SCHALISHA WALKER:** OK. Good afternoon, Chairman Arch and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Schalisha Walker. That's spelled S-c-h-a-l-i-s-h-a, Walker, W-a-l-k-e-r, and I'm the child welfare program coordinator at Nebraska Appleseed. On behalf of Nebraska Appleseed, I'm here to testify in support of LB1113. This bill proposes to use federal ARPA funds or American Rescue Plan Act funds to create a two-year pilot program to provide guaranteed income of \$1000 a month to young people after they exit the Bridge to Independence program at age 21 and to avoid the cliff effect that has been identified when the program ends and evaluate whether a continuation of support of further-- will further improve outcomes. We strongly support LB1113 because it's an evidence-based intervention that can help young people with foster care experience overcome otherwise challenging barriers and the transition to adulthood. Data shows that older youth aging out of the foster care system without achieving permanent familial support face adverse outcomes and a higher rate of homelessness, mental health disparities, incarceration, employment instability, poverty, and lack of postsecondary education and overall financial well-being at disproportionate numbers compared to their peers who have not been system involved. African-American, Native, Hispanic, Latino, and LGBTQ young people who are system involved have historically an even higher disproportionate adverse outcomes in these same categories. Young people aging out of the foster care system during the COVID-19 pandemic are doing so at a time where the economy is struggling. And myself having worked in the field for ten years directly with youth that are aging out of the foster care system, I have seen firsthand the effects that the pandemic has had on this vulnerable population. It's common for young people ages 18 to 24 to live with their parents or family and rely on them for financial support. However, young people who are aging out of the foster care system do not have the same safety net. Research has found that providing financial support for this population as they transition into adulthood can aid in prevention of these poor outcomes, increase the ability of young people to, to pursue their dreams and ambitions, and reduce costs in the long run. Research has shown that unconditional cash transfers to young people were beneficial in providing them with the freedom to maintain safe and supportive housing. And that paired with added support-- supportive services such as the system that's already in place here in Nebraska was even more effective. We also support the bill because it provides the department work-- to work with independent researchers to evaluate

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the effectiveness of the pilot program, and this would provide valuable information about how we can better serve young people in our state going forward and believe it is a good use of the COVID relief funding. We want to invest in our future, and young people are Nebraska's future. I want to thank Senator Arch and the committee for your time today and I respectfully request that you vote to advance LB1113 out of committee.

**ARCH:** Thank you for your testimony. Are there any questions? Seeing none, thank you very much.

**SCHALISHA WALKER:** Thank you.

**ARCH:** Next proponent for LB1113. Welcome.

**RODNEY EDWARDS:** Welcome-- or hello. Sorry. Do I just begin by spelling my name?

**ARCH:** You can. Just state your name and spell and, and just talk to us.

**RODNEY EDWARDS:** Thank you. Hi, my name is Rodney Edwards. That is R-o-d-n-e-y, and then Edwards, E-d-w-a-r-d-s. I'm 22-years-old and I am a proponent of the bill. And if this bill is passed, I would be among the potential recipients of this. One of the main reasons that I'm a proponent of this bill is because I think it's very much needed. One thing that my cousin, who also is in the program to bridge-- who's also in the program with Bridge to Independence, told me, he said it's funny. He used to have these ways to kind of get money to, you know, get a new video game, to get toys, whatever when we were kids. But he noticed that as we were turning in adults, that those same kind of thinking, you know, just the American spirit, you know, just doing your part to get ahead and to work. He said, you just have to do that just to survive nowadays. And I can tell that that's really true for young people right now that you really have to go the extra mile if you just want to make it last. Just want to be around in the next five years. I know that there's a lot of disagreements on COVID, but there shouldn't be one that it has had a very, very large impact on not only our society how we conduct things in official business, but also how it's affected families, how we've come together. I can speak from personal experience that when the pandemic first started, even me being someone who's slightly aware of the news, I didn't know that it would be-- I didn't know that it would last as long as it did, and I was forced to stay with grandparents for the entirety of the pandemic up to August. I was a college student who was in the dorms when a week

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just got canceled, just like that. And then after that, a whole semester. I say that to say that not only are there people who didn't have that extra resource, that, that extra support back when the pandemic started and still don't have it now, but that the pandemic also strained those supports and those resources for a lot of people that I know. And not only that cousin, but brothers, sisters, family, family members, even people who didn't necessarily go through foster care, they need help. But again, I know the parameters of this bill. The main point that I want to issue-- or the main point I want to just convey is that this support is very much needed. It's not a hand out. It's not a way for people to take advantage of a situation that wasn't brought on by their own experience or their own actions. But it's simply a means of survival, simply a means of support in saving a community. And that's all I have to say. Thank you.

**ARCH:** Thank you. Thank you for your testimony. Are there any questions? Oh--

**WALZ:** All right, I'll go first.

**ARCH:** Senator Walz.

**WALZ:** I'll go first. Hi, Rodney.

**RODNEY EDWARDS:** Hi.

**WALZ:** Thanks for coming today. I just have a couple questions. How, how long were you in foster care?

**RODNEY EDWARDS:** I was in foster care for-- my circumstances are a bit strange. I always had, like, kind of a tough home life, but the last year of my-- last year of high school, so I was only in foster care for one year total. But I-- the justice system I was kind of familiar with, so yeah.

**WALZ:** OK.

**RODNEY EDWARDS:** So sorry if that was, if that was a bit convoluted. Sorry.

**WALZ:** No, that's fine. The other question I have is as you aged out, how were you prepared to leave the foster care system and go out on your own?

**RODNEY EDWARDS:** I would say that the focus was just on my kind of immediate actions just out of the foster care system. I was a, I was a

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college student, so the, the absolute worry was just, you know, keeping me in school, making sure it was on the right track. But I would say for the large part of a lot of people who age out of foster care system, the goal is, OK, they have a current plan. They know what we're doing once we get out of here. OK, we're fine. I think it would be better if the kid was taught just kind of what to expect for a longer period set out. And maybe if there were just some resources and more guaranteed, more guaranteed benefits after and not necessarily just, not necessarily just more, but available in certain amount of times. Yeah. So I would say getting brought out of a-- bringing-- being aged out, I would say just prepared to just do basically what I was doing right there at the moment.

**WALZ:** Can I ask--

**ARCH:** Um-hum.

**WALZ:** You talked about other kids who have aged out and, you know, that they have a current plan. What-- do you know what that plan looks like? It-- I know it wasn't your plan because you had the plan to go to college and you, you kind of set your own plan in place. But do you know what a, what a current plan looks like? Is it, is it very short term?

**RODNEY EDWARDS:** A plan for that people-- the plan that the students have to, you know, make it or just a plan to--

**WALZ:** When you age out.

**RODNEY EDWARDS:** When you age out.

**WALZ:** The, the resources that they make available to you. A plan that they put in place to help you succeed once you're out. Do you know anything about what that looks like? And if not, that's OK. I was just curious.

**RODNEY EDWARDS:** No, no, it's-- I think it's a good point. I think the primary factor is just that just like life, more factors adding up things you couldn't quite expect. When I say other kids, I know my-- two of my first cousins, they're siblings, they both went to the foster care system, too, and they were just-- they both tried to go to college. But one problem after another piled up, student loans, the cost of gas going to Lincoln to Omaha, cars, new expenses, just expenses that they didn't know to deal with because, one, they weren't fully prepared for that in their original homes and foster care didn't, you know, know and make up every single difference in that

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time. So I think-- and just your question made me reflect on it, it's, it's not about necessarily just like the adequacy of how they're prepared coming out of the system, but just, you know, at the point of not having support when new problems come. So yes, that's why I just think having resources at that point would be very, very beneficial.

**WALZ:** Thank you. Thanks for coming today.

**RODNEY EDWARDS:** Thank you.

**ARCH:** Other questions? Seeing none, thank you very much. Thank you for coming. Next proponent for LB1113. Hello.

**LINCOLN ARNEAL:** Hello. Good afternoon, Chairperson Arch and members of the Health and Human Services, Human Services Committee. My name is Lincoln Arneal, L-i-n-c-o-l-n A-r-n-e-a-l, and I am the assistant vice president for policy and leadership at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. I represent Nebraska's Connected Youth Initiative, a public-private partnership created to strengthen outcomes for youth and young adults without permanent family support in Nebraska. Each year, there are over 3,500 young people that the Connected Youth Initiative, Initiative provides support between the ages of 14 and 26. I am here in support of LB1113. Currently, 213 young people are in Nebraska's extended foster care program. According to the Nebraska Bridge to Independence Extended Foster Care Evaluation Report from November 2019, many young people close to exiting the program are concerned about their future. They have anxiety about their expenses after no longer receiving the monthly stipend. While the evaluation showed that young people who exited B2I are more likely than their peers without B2I to have people to turn to in a crisis, they were no less likely than their peers to experience homelessness or have enough funds to cover monthly expenses. One solution is this program to pilot direct financial assistance, unconditional cash transfers, along with offering supportive services to youth. The basic idea with unconditional cash transfers is straightforward: provide money directly to people so they are empowered to make decisions for their sustainability and well-being. This type of strategy has the potential to offer a flexible and low-cost intervention for youth to achieve housing stability quickly and begin or continue a path towards education or career training for long-term success. A feature of LB1113 that, that would benefit young people exiting B2I is the individualized, unconditional use of that income. This pilot provides a consistent source of income for housing. It provides a financial safety net that affords young people the opportunity to take on the work that is safe and meaningful to them, and it helps sustain these

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young people while they pursue postsecondary education or career training that will increase their earning potential. This also allows them to make up for educational opportunities that may have been delayed or missed because of housing instability, child welfare involvement, or the COVID-19 pandemic. A second opportunity with LB1113 is that young people receiving unconditional cash transfers will receive supportive services from a coach in the Connected Youth Initiative program. During this two-year program, the coach and the young people work together to meet employment and educational goals to achieve sustainable living wages. We've heard from many young people in the B2I program that favor this type of direct cash transfer and want ongoing coaching support to help them achieve their financial goals. In addition, research shows that direct cash transfers paired with voluntarily-- voluntary services for financial coaching, housing navigation, and educational support lead to even more positive life outcomes. While concerns about risks associated with giving money to young people may be on your mind, research show-- research does not support concerns that young people in poverty spend money on drugs, on alcohol, or other frivolous items that are too-- or, or are too reliant on cash assistance to achieve financial independence. In Nebraska, youth who exited the B2I during the pandemic between March and December of 2020 that continued to receive a monthly stipend of \$775 per month, in addition to the supportive services provided by the Connected Youth Initiative, fared much better than their peers that received those same supportive services but did not receive a stipend during that time. Over 35 percent of young people that received a stipend reported participation in work or school, compared to just 15 percent of their nonstipend peers. Finally, youth who, who exited B2I and continued to receive a monthly stipend were significantly more likely to have a savings. Seventy-two percent of those reported the savings, compared to 34 percent of their peers without a stipend. Based on the Connected Youth Initiative data, young people in Nebraska with, with a safety net of monthly income have higher levels of hope and feeling value than their peers who did not receive a monthly stipend. In addition, we know that the feelings of hope lead to higher participation rates in school and work, which leads them to become engaged, active members of their community in the state's economy. Thank you for your time and your attention to this innovative pilot program and, and to support our state's most vulnerable young people. I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.

**ARCH:** Thank you. Are there questions? Senator Walz.

**WALZ:** Sorry. Thanks for being here today. I just wanted to clarify in your last paragraph on the first page, it says that young people

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receiving the unconditional cash transfer will receive supportive services from a coach at the Connected Youth Initiative. So every single person that would receive that \$1,000 would receive also then support from--

**LINCOLN ARNEAL:** Because they're part of the B2I program, through that they already receive supportive coach-- coaching as part of that so then the \$1,000 on top of that would be part of the B2I program.

**WALZ:** OK.

**LINCOLN ARNEAL:** So yes, through Connected Youth Initiative.

**WALZ:** All right.

**LINCOLN ARNEAL:** Yes.

**ARCH:** OK. Other questions? Senator Williams.

**WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Chairman Arch. And thank you for being here. Along with that coaching, is there, is there job skill coaching that goes with that and helping these young people get into the job market?

**LINCOLN ARNEAL:** The, the coach doesn't provide that, but assists them to find those opportunities, whether that be through a job training program or through educational opportunities. The coach is kind of, is like a life coach, so they're there to help kind of guide that through that, so they make the connections necessary or provide academic supports if they need that. So the coaching that they receive through the Connected Youth Initiative doesn't directly, but assists in finding those programs in the community or through educational institutions.

**WILLIAMS:** Do you have any information or insight into how many of these young people at that point in time are, are in a, a job that's paying?

**LINCOLN ARNEAL:** I don't have that information, but I can get that to you at a later time.

**WILLIAMS:** Thank you.

**ARCH:** Any other questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**LINCOLN ARNEAL:** Thank you for your time.

**ARCH:** Next proponent for LB1113. Welcome.

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**MARY FRASER MEINTS:** Hello, Senator Arch and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. I'm Mary Fraser Meints, M-a-r-y F-r-a-s-e-r M-e-i-n-t-s. I'm here in support of LB1113 to provide a pilot program for transition age youth who have aged out of Bridge to Independence program. I have worked with youth in the foster care system or youth that have aged out of the foster care system for my 40-year career. I know this population and I trust them and think they are amazing. I was on the Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee, but I'm not here in that official capacity. Research by Chapin Hall indicates that 1 in 30 youth ages 13 to 17 and youth who are ages 18 to 25, 1 in 10 of those youth experience homelessness annually. That's a huge number. I know youth aging out of the foster care system may end up homeless. When a youth experiences homelessness, it affects their ability to have a job, to go to school. It affects their relationships and their whole future. The biggest predictor of being a homeless adult is experiencing homelessness as a child or a youth. According to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness: To end homelessness in America, we must strengthen our ability to prevent it in the first place. To do that, we must take a "multisector" approach that focuses on housing needs, housing stability, and risks of homelessness across many different public systems. True Colors United and the National Homelessness Law Center released the 2020 State Index Report on youth homelessness. This index provides a snapshot of some of the legal, systemic, and, and environmental barriers faced by youth experiencing homelessness. Nebraska received a score of 37 out of 100. We rank 44th in all the states and District of Columbia. This pilot program is a great step forward in preventing youth homelessness for youth who age out of the Bridge to Independence program. I have found that youth who experience homelessness are brave, resilient, and creative. They want to be self-sufficient. Having a targeted transfer of \$1,000 a month plus the coach and other supports will provide them with financial stability, and they will be able to attend school, rent an apartment, buy a car, and be self-sufficient. The young people know their needs and are the best ones to decide how they spend their money. I encourage you to support this bill and possibly increase Nebraska's status in the state index on youth homelessness and help young people aging out of the foster care system to avoid homelessness. Thank you for your time.

**ARCH:** Thank you for your testimony. Are there any questions? Seeing none, thank you very much.

**MARY FRASER MEINTS:** Thank you.

**ARCH:** Next proponent for LB1113. Welcome.

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**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** Greetings. Good afternoon. My name is Cornelius Levering. First name is spelled C-o-r-n-e-l-i-u-s, last name Levering, L-e-v-e-r-i-n-g. I am here today in support of bill, LB1113. So I'll begin. Greetings, Chairperson Arch and members of Health and Human Services Committee. Again, my name is Cornelius Levering and I'm a former state ward of Nebraska. I lived most, if not all of my youth in the child welfare system until aging out at 19-years-old. After aging out, despite my tenacity for survival and making a better life for myself, I was met with many challenges. I was a foster youth who qualified for what was known as the former ward program, which has now morphed into the Bridge to Independence program or otherwise known as B2I. Without going into too much detail, B2I was brought about because of a serious issue that existed and exists-- sorry-- exists when state wards age out of the system. Some youth will be dropped off at homeless shelters and worse, trafficked. With that being said, I want you to know, I want you to know that all of us are here for a very important cause today. We are talking about a matter of life and death for these youth. I cannot emphasize that enough. The former ward program paid for my room and board at my alma mater. This program, in the grand scheme of things, kept me on the path of achieving my degree in journalism, public relations, and advertising. However, when I turned 21, the support was withdrawn. I had no support of adults in my life to help me get to work or school. I relied on public transportation systems and if desperate enough walked for miles. I had vehicles that were not at all the best. But if it got me from point A to Z, that was all that mattered that day or for that week. Despite making it over all of the odds, I graduated, which I say proudly, debt free and homeless. But to many people's surprise, they look at me as if that is-- that look at me as that, how is that even possible when I just graduated with a \$20,000-plus education. When we're talking about passing LB1113, there really should be no room for debate. The youth who are aging out of the system need the support in order to make a way for themselves. Some may, some may call this socialism or a hand out, but what do you call it when the state goes after these youth's SSI benefits and they are left with nothing? I sit here before you all today and can say proudly and confident-- confidently that the support I received was helpful to me. The state of Nebraska and invested stakeholders should be praising themselves about the progress we have made in addressing this population. There is more that, that can still be done to ensure a better life for these youth who are on the cuffs of aging out. I want to be clear I am a realist and while I know there are some youth who will not use the resources, we owe it to the ones who will. I want to thank Senator McKinney and the committee for

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overseeing this important issue and urge you all to push it forward.  
Thank you.

**ARCH:** Thank you. Are there any questions? Senator Walz.

**WALZ:** Thank you. Thanks for coming today. Appreciate it, Cornelius.

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** Thank you.

**WALZ:** Can you, can you kind of describe as you aged out what the process was or what kind of, you know, plan there was for you to succeed once you aged out? Was there a plan? You mentioned that, you know, some youth would be dropped off at homeless shelters. So that kind of concerns me what kind of plan is in place.

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** So at the time when I was aging out of the system, I was already considered a-- I was, I was a unique youth, OK, so I was already a part of a percentage that was going to college. And that is-- that doesn't typically happen within the population. So at that point in time, they really had no concerns, I guess you could say, with me aging out of the system. They knew that I was enrolled and I had gotten a scholarship into UNO and they knew that, that would be my plan. And then I would have to figure it out from there. So mind you, I, I did not come from a, a wealthy background. I bought my first car with my first Pell Grant, actually. And sometimes I don't know if that was a good decision in life, but nobody was going to get me to my doctor's appointments, you know, I had to rely really on myself to do that, you know. So as far as there being a solid plan, they just, you know, had decided that I was, you know, smart enough or, you know, could function high enough where I could basically figure it out on my own.

**WALZ:** OK.

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** Even despite how challenging those times were, you know, at times.

**WALZ:** Sure. Thank you.

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** Yeah.

**WALZ:** I appreciate that feedback.

**ARCH:** Senator Cavanaugh.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Thank you. Thank you for being here.

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** Thank you.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** And for your testimony. You mentioned the SSI benefits.

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** That's correct.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Did you have SSI benefits that they utilized while you were a ward of the state?

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** To the best of my knowledge, there were SSI benefits in my name. I got a \$1,700 check when I was 19 still to my old foster home because that's where my mail was still going to. I thought it was fake. Being a college student, I thought, you know, somebody was trying to just, you know, scheme me or something. But it was, it was a real check from the SSI. I really don't have any record or, you know, any proof now to, to show that, but I, I remember it like it was yesterday. I took that check and I cashed it and I walked away with \$1,700 from SSI benefits.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** And has the state ever informed you of how much money they collected on your behalf?

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** So really, it was, it was all kind of a, a murky situation, I guess to say, to say the least. I remember the caseworkers I had, they were, I think, you know, mystified just as much as I was about what had happened to the money and, and where it had gone. But I was never informed of--

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Do you recall signing any forms?

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** I never signed any form.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Thank you very much.

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** Thank you.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Oh, one more question. You graduated?

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** I did. I graduated from University of Nebraska Omaha with Buffett Scholarship.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** OK. And you have-- your degree is in journalism, public relations, and advertising.

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** That's correct.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** What do you want to do next?

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**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** Well, my dream job was always to work for Microsoft, I guess I would say, but I don't-- that-- you know that hasn't happened, but I'm happy with where I'm at and, you know, what I do, so.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Great. Well, thank you for taking the time today.

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** Thank you.

**ARCH:** Thank you. Any other questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony. Thank you--

**CORNELIUS LEVERING:** Thank you.

**ARCH:** --very much. Next proponent for LB1113. Is there anyone else that would like to testify as a proponent for LB1113? Is there anyone that would like to testify as an opponent for LB1113? Anyone wish to testify in a neutral capacity on LB1113? Seeing none, Senator McKinney, you're welcome to close. As you're coming up, I would mention that we've received eight letters in support, no opponents, no neutral for LB1113.

**McKINNEY:** First, I would like to say thank you to everyone that came to testify today and taking the time out of your day to speak on this important issue. And I think from the testimony, I think-- I, I would hope that the committee was able to see that this is not just something to where we're just throwing money at youth. It's about providing them with the basic necessities to survive. And being someone that-- I didn't grow up in the foster care system, but I remember being a poor college student. I had to fill out my FAFSA by myself. My mom didn't know how to do it. Nobody in my family had ever went to college. So I identify with that struggle of being a poor student in college and trying to figure it out. And I just hope that we, as a body, we make a commitment to doing whatever we can to help these individuals be successful because the more of them that are successful, the better outcomes for our state overall across the board, not only just in my district, but in western Nebraska as well. I think if we do more to make a commitment to youth that deal with adverse childhood experiences and trauma as, as-- because going through the foster care system, is not the best situation. I know foster care parents try to do the best they can, but a lot of times from what I've seen, it's not always the best situation, especially when you're pulling youth away from parents. And I just think it's-- we have a good opportunity on the table, and I think we should take

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advantage of it to try to empower our youth going forward for the best future not only for our youth, but for our state. Thank you.

**ARCH:** Thank you. Are there any further questions? Senator Cavanaugh.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Thank you. Thank you, Senator McKinney. Well, since no one was here to answer questions about the fiscal note and I heard Mr. Arneal's testimony as well about--

**McKINNEY:** Did he say 213?

**M. CAVANAUGH:** --213 young people are--

**McKINNEY:** Yeah.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** --in extended foster care program. So I guess I'm more just saying this for the record and for your benefit and hopefully for HHS to explain a little bit further that they would need to hire additional people to do the work that the 213 people are doing just because they have to tell those children that-- I'm sorry, young adults, that they will be receiving \$1,000 a month. Is that your understanding?

**McKINNEY:** Yeah, that's what I, I took from it. And again, I think if we already have these programs set up, I don't see how it's not a seamless process. It is more so from, from my vision and I say, hey, you're now eligible for this benefit. That's a simple conversation. I, I think if we're already meeting with these youth on a regular, why can't we just have that simple conversation saying, hey, the Legislature just passed this. You are eligible for this. Fill this out. That is probably a 30-second conversation, a five minute fill this out. I don't understand why you need to hire a bunch of people to do that.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** I just would also note that I looked at Senator Hunt's bill, LB932, which is a Social Security bill, and they didn't seem to have, have to hire that many additional people to inform children that they were signing away their rights to their Social Security, so. Thank you.

**McKINNEY:** Oh, no problem. Thank you.

**ARCH:** Any other questions? Senator Williams.

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**WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Chairman Arch. And, and thank you, Senator McKinney. You're, you're applying in this legislation to use American Recovery [SIC] Plan Act dollars.

**McKINNEY:** Yes.

**WILLIAMS:** Can you track through with us just a little bit about how this program would qualify for, for those particular dollars?

**McKINNEY:** It, it would qualify because it deals with negative impacts because of COVID.

**WILLIAMS:** OK. And can you--

**McKINNEY:** It's within the guideline.

**WILLIAMS:** --describe to us so that we hear what those-- the, the negative impacts that COVID caused that changed this issue that we have from what it was before COVID to what it is now?

**McKINNEY:** Imagine, as stated by one of the student-- one-- Rodney that spoke, a college student where you're going through this life and then the pandemic hits and you're not able to kind of go through life normal anymore. You're stuck in your dorm, you don't have access to individuals that you've, you've had access to. Then if you have access to somebody, say, I come to you and you're my uncle, Uncle Williams, and I ask you for \$50 one week--

**WILLIAMS:** I think a brother Williams.

**McKINNEY:** Brother Williams.

**WILLIAMS:** Maybe grandfather.

**McKINNEY:** And, and, and I ask you for maybe, let's say, \$50 to \$100 just to get by. Because we're-- nobody thought the pandemic would last as long as it did. So initially, I asked for \$100 because I'm thinking, OK, the month, month will pass or two weeks will pass and we'll be back to normal and I could pay you back and I don't need the ask for \$100 again. But because the pandemic lasted so long, I can't come back to you and ask you for another \$100 because I still owe you \$100. And because I still owe you and I still have bills, the bills are piling up. Basic necessities aren't being met and that's what happened.

**WILLIAMS:** Thank you.

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**McKINNEY:** No problem.

**ARCH:** Senator Walz.

**WALZ:** Thanks. So you're saying that you're kind of running out of your resources?

**McKINNEY:** Yes.

**WALZ:** I just have a, a question regarding, does the money have to go through DHHS? I mean, is-- I, I know that's in the bill, or could it, could it go through another program like-- and I'm just going to mention this one, not that it's going to, the Connected Youth Initiative, for example? I mean, does it have to go through DHHS?

**McKINNEY:** I-- if, if it's easier to go through another route, then I'm all for it, for it as well. If that's easier to go through the Connected program than DHHS to take away the \$40 million fiscal note, I'm all for it. Whichever way we can get them the resources they need, you, you got me.

**WALZ:** All right. Thank you.

**McKINNEY:** No problem.

**ARCH:** Any other questions? Seeing none, thank you very much.

**McKINNEY:** Thank you.

**ARCH:** This will close the hearing for LB1113. And we will open the hearing for LB1173 and Senator Williams will take the chair.

**WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Chairman Arch. And we are now opening the hearing on LB1173, introduced by the HHS Committee to create a work group and strategic leadership group for the child welfare system reform. Welcome Chair-- Chairman Arch.

**ARCH:** Good afternoon, Vice Chair Williams, members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is John Arch, J-o-h-n A-r-c-h, and I'm before you to introduce LB1173, which was one of our committee bills introduced by the Health and Human Services Committee. The goal of LB1173 is to set the stage on a strategic path for child welfare in Nebraska. LB1173 is based on two recommendations from the LR29 report, which all of you were involved in this past summer. As you know, we spent many months over the interim taking a look at child welfare in Nebraska and in the Eastern Service Area, specifically. One of the

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recommendations that came out of our work on LR29 was to convene a work group to develop a strategic, a shared strategic direction for child welfare in Nebraska. That recommendation was based on observations from our hearings, which was, in summary, the child welfare stakeholders, including DHHS, the judiciary, providers, and others do not have a shared and concrete clear vision and understanding of how best to serve vulnerable families in Nebraska. One of the things we did in our work on LR29 was to look back at the history of child welfare, especially the history of privatization in our state beginning in the early 2000s. And if you remember some of that history, what you can see is that there has been a rapid evolution of how we're providing child welfare services in our state. But much of that change has been reactive and driven by urgency, rather than strategic planning spanning many years, many administrations and, and many, many directors. It was clear that the privatization initiative suffered from lack of planning from the outset. First, we were privatizing only service coordination. Then it morphed into privatization of case management. Along the way, we had private lead agencies requiring additional funding, going bankrupt, terminating their contracts, turning responsibility back over to DHHS. Eventually, as we know, we were left with privatized case management only in Douglas and Sarpy Counties, and that relationship with PromiseShip continued with relative stability for several years. However, it was a challenging relationship between DHHS and the contractor, and part of that was the lack of clarity, which was the determination of the committee regarding the role the contractor was to play. To be clear, LB1173 isn't about continuing privatized case management. Rather, it is about thinking strategically about how, how we do child welfare in Nebraska. What role do we expect private agencies to provide? How are we using data to guide our approach? What's working in other states? How can we incentivize innovation? Many questions on the table. One of the hearings that I reflected on often is we did our work on LR29 was a hearing we had last session on Senator Cavanaugh's LB491, which would remove the statutory authority for privatized case management. And what we heard providers at that hearing was that they liked privatization and the ability it gave them to innovate and pilot new programs. In particular, they liked innovation. They liked the ability to do that. So I think part of this work group's charge is to determine how can we keep some of the good things that came about through privatization and promote collaboration between the department, providers, and child welfare stakeholders? LB1173 would establish a work group including, but not limited to, representatives of DHHS, the Department of Education, the courts, and the Indian tribes, and task the work group with developing a practice

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and finance model for child welfare in Nebraska with consultation from key stakeholders, including private providers, individuals with lived experience in child welfare. The practice model would include, among other things, a statewide vision and mission for child welfare, values and practice priorities, statewide program goals, engagement strategies to support community involvement, strategies that strengthen relationships across the court system, probation, executive branch agencies, the Department of Education, and community partners, opportunities and financial mechanisms for providers to pilot innovation solution, and a strategy for data collection and outcome monitoring. Large work. LB1173 also includes a second recommendation from the LR29 report, which to-- is to evaluate Nebraska 4E claiming efforts and determine what steps may be appropriate to optimize federal reimbursement. According to a Child Trends report based on 2018 data, Nebraska is far behind other states in its use of federal reimbursement. Currently, 81 percent of Nebraska's child welfare funding comes from state and local sources compared to the national average of 55 percent. So this is just one piece of the strategic planning we were asking the work group to take a look at. The work group will provide a monthly update to a child welfare strategic leadership group with representation from the three branches of government. There's actually already a three-branch group that meets each month, including the chairs of the Legislature's HHS, myself, and Judiciary Committee's Senator Lathrop, the Chief Justice, and the CEO of DHHS. So this group will provide oversight of the strategic planning process. There is a fiscal note associated with the consultant that this bill would authorize DHHS to hire to assist with developing the written framework for the practice and finance model. I've spoken with CEO Smith about the need for a consultant. We agree that having an outside consultant with expertise in child welfare will be extremely beneficial to this process. And when you consider the importance of getting our child welfare system on the right track, I think this is money well spent. I think we all understand that we're at a turning point and really an opportunity with respect to child welfare in the Eastern Service Area with Saint Francis gradually transitioning case management now back to the state. So now is an appropriate time to take a hard look at how we're serving vulnerable children and families across our state, set the course for the future, come to agreement with the stakeholders, and move, and move forward with a strategic vision. So with that, I would close and invite any questions you might have.

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**WILLIAMS:** Are there questions for Chairman Arch? Seeing none, thank you. We will invite our first proponent and we would invite CEO Smith if she would like to testify first.

**DANNETTE SMITH:** Good afternoon, Chairperson Arch and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Dannette R. Smith, D-a-n-n-e-t-t-e, middle initial R, last name, Smith, S-m-i-t-h, and I am the chief executive officer for the Department of Health and Human Services, DHHS. I'm here to testify in support of LB1173, which will create a work group and strategic leadership group for reimagining child welfare in Nebraska. I have had the opportunity to speak before this committee, as well as the Executive Board and the Eastern Service Area Oversight Committee on several occasions. Each time I have reiterated the importance of setting a statewide vision and practice model for child welfare as we move forward into the future. While this model would guide Nebraska's child welfare practice, this framework would ensure children and families are at the center of care utilizing best practices, outcome measures, and good fiscal stewardship. It will necessitate operationally realigning and re-imagining of services and supports across the entire child welfare system. In order to do so, it requires participation from every sector that touches the system informed by those individuals with lived experiences. Until now, child welfare has been seen as a service primarily led by DHHS. CFS Director Beasley and her team have already begun this work with a number of stakeholders. While the Division of Children and Family Services plays a significant role, it is not solely the responsibility for ensuring safety, healthy, and thriving families in Nebraska. Others from sectors such as education, juvenile justice, court systems, healthcare, child advocacy, and nonprofit organization inform and implement these-- this work each and every day. I'm proud to support LB1173, which will create a cross-sectional practice model work group overseen by the three branches of government to develop and implement this transformation. The opportunity to contract with a consultant to assist with the work will ensure that this work group maintains focus, draws on national best practices. The time limited nature of this work will also ensure that this framework is completed swiftly and purposefully. My expectation is that this practice model will be implemented once the framework is completed and regularly evaluated and fine-tuned by the cross-sectional group as needed. I respectfully request that the committee support this legislation and move it to the floor for full debate. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I'd be happy to answer any of your questions.

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**WILLIAMS:** Thank you, CEO Smith. Are there questions? Senator Cavanaugh.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Thank you. Thank you, CEO Smith. I hope you're well.

**DANNETTE SMITH:** I'm well. How about yourself?

**M. CAVANAUGH:** I am too.

**DANNETTE SMITH:** Good.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Thank you. Do you need us to do this, or can you do this on your own? I guess is my question.

**DANNETTE SMITH:** We'd love to have you do it because we feel like it's the three branches that brings this whole vision and mission together.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** OK, so, so this would help bring more authority to the group for you instead of you just doing it [INAUDIBLE]?

**DANNETTE SMITH:** Well, I think what we're trying to achieve is not only this being a DHHS project, but it's a systems project that includes legislation, the judiciary, and certainly the executive branch. Where I've seen this have positive impact is when all of the branches are participating, and that's why we think it's so important that you participate.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Great. Thank you so much. That sounds like a really hard thing to do, and I appreciate your willingness to take it on.

**WILLIAMS:** Any additional questions? Senator Walz.

**WALZ:** I just have a-- thank you. Thanks for being here today. Good to see you. In, in your testimony, you talked about how important it is to have participation from every sector that touches the system. And you mentioned education, juvenile justice, court systems, so on. I, I think it was 2012 that the legislator-- Legislature created the Nebraska Children's Commission. And so I'm wondering, is that, is that an organization that you would also be asking for help? I mean, they've been around and have been working on a, on a plan for a long time, is that--

**DANNETTE SMITH:** Absolutely. In fact, I think that Stephanie has been doing some work with them around some of the operations work that she's been doing with this-- with her stakeholders around the child welfare model, and I believe they're included. Our goal, Senator Walz,

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is to make sure that everybody who touches, informs our system, participates in the system has an opportunity to help us develop best outcomes for children and families. What I've seen throughout my career and even here in Nebraska is that when it is solely left to one department or one branch of government the success of making it be successful for the children and families that touch that system, both from an intervention perspective and a prevention perspective, it doesn't go away. And so to have everybody at the table giving their voice, informing the process, holding each other accountable makes sure that we provide the right types of services that families and children need in this community.

**WALZ:** All right. Thank you.

**DANNETTE SMITH:** Um-hum.

**WILLIAMS:** Any additional questions? Seeing none, thank you, CEO Smith.

**DANNETTE SMITH:** Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** We would invite Corey Steel, our court administrator.

**COREY STEEL:** Senator Williams,--

**WILLIAMS:** Welcome.

**COREY STEEL:** --thank you, members of the education committee. I'm usually in front of the Judiciary, so I made sure to slow down there. First off, my name is Corey Steel, C-o-r-e-y S-t-e-e-l, and I am the state court administrator for the state of Nebraska. I want to thank Senator Arch for his leadership in child welfare over the last several years. It's been a pleasure to have him on the three-branch meeting as he discussed where we sit down monthly with the Chief Justice, CEO Smith, and others to discuss child welfare juvenile justice issues. Thank you as well for this committee for including the judicial branch in the LR29 process that allowed judges to voice their opinion, that allowed you to sit down with judges and hear from them on how the child welfare system is going, and especially in the privatization. The judges really appreciated that, and they felt that it was a good opportunity to provide candid feedback to a lot of questions. The judicial branch and the Chief Justice support the outlying concept in LB1173, the strategic planning process and the leadership committee process. I do want to make one thing clear that we have met with CEO Smith and discussed is there may be at some points in time as a judicial branch, we would have to step back and recuse ourself if there is any-- anything that was coming to that, that would be a

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policy decision or in the legislation. And CEO Smith understands that as well as Senator Arch, I believe, and we would, we would do that respectfully, but we do want to be part of the process because we feel there's value in the judicial branch being part of that process to provide information, provide data, and to help support the initiative. Because, as CEO Smith said, this is a three-branch initiative. It takes all three branches to effectively, efficiently provide what is needed for the child welfare system in Nebraska. So again, we're in support of this concept. We will be at the table. We will be there to help support in any way we can and know when it is our turn to maybe step away. I want to thank Senator Arch for his leadership around these issues and this committee, the HHS Committee's leadership around these issues that is desperately needed for the state of Nebraska. I also want to thank personally Dannette Smith for her continued collaboration with not only myself, but Chief Justice Heavican, and the rest of the judiciary across the state. It is something that has not always happened with HHS and the judiciary, and I feel that the collaboration and the, and the communication back and forth is probably the strongest it's been in close to the 20 years that I've been doing this. So I'm happy to answer any questions anybody may have.

**WILLIAMS:** Are there questions for Mr. Steel? Thank you for your willingness to be here, and I think this committee clearly understands the role of the judiciary and your concern about policy making. But the information that you can provide is absolutely vital for making the right decisions for our kids. Thank you.

**COREY STEEL:** Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Invite the next proponent. Good afternoon and welcome.

**SUZANNE HANEY:** Good afternoon, members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Dr. Suzanne Haney, S-u-z-a-n-n-e H-a-n-e-y. I am currently the state's only child abuse pediatrician and the-- run the only comprehensive foster care clinic in Nebraska. I'm here testifying on behalf of Children's Hospital and Medical Center. At Children's, we recognize the importance of partnership and collaboration. It takes a statewide effort to ensure every child involved in the child welfare system is accounted for and receiving the high quality care we all strive for them to have. I've had over 12 years of experience with the foster care system, and I'm extremely grateful for the growing partnership we have currently with the Department of Health and Human Services. And I'm very grateful for CEO Smith's recent comments. I'm here before you today with gratitude for

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LB1173 and I want to applaud the Legislature and DHHS in their efforts to improve child welfare. Our team has been working hard over the past few years to ensure that children in foster care in Nebraska receive the necessary and appropriate medical and behavioral health--healthcare. And I think you've seen me testify on their behalf. We recognize that any transition can be difficult and stand ready to continue to partner with the Legislature and HHS as we move forward with child welfare. In closing, I specifically want to thank Senator Arch and Senator Cavanaugh for their spearheading their efforts related to child welfare system in Nebraska to ensure that we protect these children. Without your guidance and support, we would not have the opportunity to be convening so publicly to make a difference. I look forward to what is ahead and we want to continue to partner with everybody and be at the table if we can. So thank you very much.

**WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Dr. Haney. Are there questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**SUZANNE HANEY:** Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Invite the next proponent. Good afternoon and welcome.

**KATIE McLEESE STEPHENSON:** Good afternoon. Good afternoon, Senator Arch and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Katie McLeese Stephenson. It's spelled K-a-t-i-e, McLeese is M-c-L-e-e-s-e, separate word no hyphen Stephenson, S-t-e-p-h-e-n-s-o-n. It's a pleasure to be with you today representing the 52 agencies that are part of the Nebraska Association of Behavioral Health Organizations, or commonly known as NABHO. This year marks my 40th year as a social worker in Nebraska and always serving on behalf of children and families. I've had the opportunity to work for state agencies under both the executive and judicial branch, and I've spent 18 years in the private sector working on behalf of children and families involved in the child welfare system. My career has involved providing direct care to adolescents who are state wards, managing and leading services on the Whitehall Campus, and, and in state-run group homes. I had the privilege to organize and lead Nebraska's first Child and Family Service Review, or CFSR, in 2002. After leaving state government, I served as chief operating officer of a local nonprofit that was one of the five lead agencies during privatization of child welfare and saw firsthand the flaws and unnecessary upheaval that the ill thought out implementation caused for the children, families, and the committed staff of many nonprofits across the state. Privatization decimated the child welfare system and countless agencies and programs and services were lost as a result.

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I've also had the privilege to serve as an elected official on the LPS Board of Education from 2011 to 2015 in a district with great schools and great needs. I was honored to serve as the director of the Nebraska Court Improvement Project through the Administration-- Administrative Office of the Courts under Chief Heavican, State Court Administrator Corey Steel, and then Nebraska State Probation Administration-- Administrator Ellen Brokofsky under the judicial branch. Our team worked statewide with juvenile and county court judges to help improve the child welfare and juvenile justice process. Since 2016, I've served as the executive director of HopeSpoke, formerly known as the Child Guidance Center. We're the largest provider of behavioral health services for children and youth in Lincoln and last year served nearly 1,500 individuals with 88 percent of those under the age of 19. I share all this not to toot my own horn or demonstrate how old I am, but to let you know how deeply invested I am in the child welfare system and the various perspectives that I've had and the opportunity to gain those. NABHO extends its full support to LB1173. Child welfare is not, nor should it just be the job of the Department of Health and Human Services. It's the job of all Nebraskans that care deeply about children and their impact on the future of our state. What I particularly like about this bill is the careful way that a systems approach to a needed strategic planning process for child welfare has been crafted, including the three branches of state government, private providers, and in my opinion, most importantly, those with lived experience. I have learned over the last many years that the input and meaningful involvement of those that have firsthand experience with whatever the issue is being discussed is essential. There's a great tenet in the evidence-based wraparound services, nothing about us, without us, meaning that we need to be at the table if someone's having a discussion about our lives, and I think that can't be overrated for a worthy dialog, such as this important topic. In the nearly 20 years that I worked for the Department of Health and Human Services on both the Whitehall Campus and in the central office, I worked with some of the finest, smartest, and most dedicated professionals that I've ever known. Many have now since left or retired, but I know that those that remain are doing their very best each and every day with the resources that they have to meet the needs of the children in their care and custody, and to prevent others from entering the system. But they can't, nor should they shoulder the responsibility alone. The courts and probation have a tremendous role to play as does the Legislature, the Department of Ed, many providers of child welfare and behavioral health services, and those with lived experience. A systemic approach require-- a systemic problem requires a systemic approach. Nebraska can be a

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leader in child welfare in our country and should be. We're uniquely positioned to lead with a smaller state population, a Unicameral approach, and an executive and judicial branch with leadership that cares about children and their families and is dedicated to work across systems to do what's right for children and their families, despite who gets the credit. When we invest in these efforts today, we can stave off the need for more prisons when these children become adults. Thank you for your commitment to children and their families and your service in the Legislature. Your leadership is important on this topic and so many others. I'd be happy to try to respond to any questions you might have.

**WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Miss Stephenson. Are there questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**KATIE McLEESE STEPHENSON:** Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Invite the next proponent. Welcome.

**IVY SVOBODA:** Thank you. Good afternoon, Senator Williams and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Ivy Svoboda, I-v-y S-v-o-b-o-d-a, and I'm the executive director of the Nebraska Alliance of Child Advocacy Centers here testifying in support of LB1173. The Nebraska Alliance of Child Advocacy Centers is the nationally accredited membership organization for the seven child advocacy centers, or CACs, which serve children and families and systems that work to keep them safe and well in all 93 counties within our state. Our mission is to enhance the response to child abuse in Nebraska. As a founding executive director for the Nebraska Alliance, I have worked with our CACs to build a better response to child abuse since 2007. I'm no stranger to statewide reform efforts, having seen many in my role and experienced both their successes and failures. In the view of the Nebraska Alliance, LB1173 has a number of strengths in the approach that it takes to ensuring system transformation. One, it brings stakeholders together across state agencies, disciplines, and branches of government. Two, creates a group with a clear scope and purpose that is time limited. Three, it ties in the important question of how financing and funding is a tool for system transformation. And finally, it incorporates and lifts up expertise and wisdom on those with lived experience. As central to system transformation, this is an element that has often been missing. I have been privileged over the past year or so to participate in conversations convened by the Department of Health and Human Services that CEO Smith mentioned around strategic transformation and alignment of Nebraska's child welfare system. Nebraska CACs believe these efforts show promise and

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would like them to continue. LB1173 can be that pathway. I will offer a few comments and ideas around how LB1183-- LB1173, sorry, can be strengthened and avoid pitfalls of prior reform efforts. First, the front door of the child welfare system is not explicitly mentioned in LB1173. CACs strongly believe the system for reporting and investigating abuse, assessing safety and risk, and deciding whether or and how a family will be connected to services must be a part of the analysis and efforts for our strategic transformation effort. These processes are essential to the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families. We must examine them and figure out how they can be equal part and focus of Nebraska systems transformation work. So two weeks ago, I appeared before this committee on LB854 related to abuse investigations of child care centers. That's just one of the examples of the areas where abuse investigations need to be examined and strengthened for children and families. So in addition to adding an explicit reference to investigations and assessments, CACs also recommends considering additions to those named as members or parties that be consulted throughout the process. First, we would suggest adding child advocacy centers themselves. We are defined in statute and listed as part of the Child Protection and Family Safety Act. We are eager to be a part of this work and our experience bringing systems together on a local level can be a benefit to the effort underway. While LB1173 focuses on state government, Nebraska law gives significant role and broad discretion to two more parties, law enforcement and county attorneys, both whom are part of the local governments. There are over 200 law enforcement agencies in Nebraska. They have responsibility to investigate and assess whether children are seriously endangered and should be removed for their immediate protection. County attorneys decide whether to file charges in juvenile and criminal court and whether and how to involve family in the court system. They make requests around placement and services that children and families receive. These key stakeholders are not currently mentioned in LB1173. The decisions of county attorneys and law enforcement have a powerful impact on what happens to families and their experience in the child welfare system. Too often reform efforts on the statewide level have run into local confusion and resistance from partners who are not involved in some of the strategic decisions and conversations going on elsewhere. Two examples of this are the state adoption of alternative response, which continues to be a point of contention and confusion on the local level in some communities in the state, and changes in policy and practice around drug testing in 2018 and 2019. Thank you to this committee and others who participated in LR29 for your leadership and working result in these important findings and recommendations

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that were released last year. LB1173 is an important piece to make sure the transformative work continues. Nebraska Alliance and our CAC members across the state are eager to partner on system transformation and make sure children and families experiencing abuse are safe and well. I welcome any questions you may have.

**WILLIAMS:** Are there questions? Seeing no questions, thank you for your testimony and for your suggestions.

**IVY SVOBODA:** Thanks.

**WILLIAMS:** Invite the next proponent. Welcome, Miss Gilbertson.

**KORBY GILBERTSON:** Good afternoon, Senator Williams, members of the committee. For the record, my name is Korby Gilbertson. It's spelled K-o-r-b-y G-i-l-b-e-r-t-s-o-n. I'm appearing today as a registered lobbyist on behalf of Boys Town in support of LB1173. Boys Town has been a national leader in providing services to children and their families for 100 years through direct child and family services, the Boys Town National Hospital and medical clinics, education and training, and innovative applied research. Boys Town strives to continue to meet the unique needs of each child and family they encounter. Boys Town is a tireless advocate for meaningful child welfare programs and services and appropriate juvenile justice system. Boys Town applauds the Health and Human Services Committee's dedication to ensuring that children in Nebraska remain a top priority by bringing leaders and stakeholders together to make comprehensive changes to the Nebraska child welfare system. As you know, LB1173 would allow for the adoption of an integrated model for child welfare that addresses and includes the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, as well as community stakeholders. In part, the bill would establish a child welfare practice model work group consisting of the five Department of Health and Human Services division directors, the Commissioner of Education, the State Court Administrator, a representative of the State Supreme Court, and representatives from each of the federally recognized Indian tribes within Nebraska. While this work group is directed to consult with key stakeholders, we believe that it would be beneficial to specifically include or formally define the role of those with lived experiences, including diverse provider represented-- representation from across the state, representatives from the Foster Care Office, the Office of the Inspector General of Nebraska Child Welfare, the Nebraska Children's Commission, and the Juvenile Services Division of the Courts and Probation as either part of the working group or to have a better defined role than just listed as potential consultation points.

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Boys Town looks forward to working through this process with all three branches of government, and we thank you again for your dedication to this issue. Be happy to try to answer any questions.

**WILLIAMS:** Are there questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**KORBY GILBERTSON:** Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Invite the next proponent. Good afternoon and welcome.

**PEGG SIEMEK-ASCHE:** Thank you. Good afternoon, Chairman Arch and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Pegg Siemek-Asche. That's P-e-g-g S-i-e-m-e-k hyphen A-s-c-h-e. I am the CEO of Nova Treatment Community and president of the Children and Family Coalition of Nebraska, or CAFCON, who I am testifying on behalf of today. CAFCON is comprised of nine child welfare and family service provider agencies. The nine established leader organizations of CAFCON are the backbone of child welfare services in the state. These agencies include Bethany Christian Services, Boys Town, CSI, Heartland Family Services, KVC, Lutheran Family Services, Nebraska Children's Home Society, Nova, and Omaha Home for Boys. First, I wish to thank Chairman Arch, the Health and Human Services Committee members, and the members of the LR29 committee and their staff for the attentiveness, commitment, and thoroughness they showed during the investigative hearings that were held last year. We also appreciate the committee introducing LB1173 to continue the conversation about what is best for Nebraska's child welfare system reform. I appear today in support of LB1173 and to express to this committee CAFCON's commitment to an interest in establishing stability for the child welfare system in Nebraska and particularly in the Eastern Service Area. The transition from Saint Francis back to DHHS has been challenging in many ways. The future of services in the ESA needs to be determined sooner than later to avoid future disruption. There is value in establishing the strategic leadership group. Ensuring that the state leaders who oversee child welfare services are continuously engaged and review of the system is likely to result in the betterment of the system and the ability of the state to be responsive when necessary. The one recommendation our members ask for is that consideration be given to including intentionally and comprehensively the providers that serve Nebraska's children and families. The LR29 committee recommendation contemplates that this work group would facilitate collaboration between providers and DHHS, allow opportunities for providers to innovate and incentivizes achievement of program goals. We respectfully submit that the best way to do that

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is to engage providers by ensuring their representation on and involvement in the activities of the work group. One thing we know from our members' involvement in the system for decades is that direct provider engagement and an intentional effort to accept and act on feedback and ideas from them is the best way to ensure the efficacy of the system and that it continues to serve the best interests of children and families. We would greatly appreciate the opportunity to participate in the work group, if appropriate, and to continue discussions and be a resource to the committee. I'm available to answer any questions you may have.

**WILLIAMS:** Are there questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**PEGG SIEMEK-ASCHE:** Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Invite the next proponent. Is there anyone else here to testify in support? Seeing none, is there anyone here to testify in opposition? Seeing none, is there anyone to testify in a neutral capacity? Welcome.

**AUBREY MANCUSO:** Good afternoon, Senator Williams, members of the committee. My name is Aubrey Mancuso, A-u-b-r-e-y M-a-n-c-u-s-o, and I'm here on behalf of Voices for Children in Nebraska. We want to recognize and appreciate this committee and the Legislature's attention to the ongoing challenges in Nebraska's child welfare system and also draw attention to the ways in which the issues raised in LB1173 have already been significantly studied by this Legislature. And in fact a decade ago, the Legislature created an entity intended to circumvent the need for additional study. In 2012, after statewide child welfare privatizations failed, the Legislature undertook LR37 to study what had happened and make recommendations on next steps. This set up the situation that we had in place for the past decade with privatized services only in the Eastern Service Area labeled as a pilot project. Prior to the contract with Saint Francis Ministries, the system was stable if imperfect. One of the recommendations included in LR37 was that the Legislature create a permanent governmental body for reasons similar to those outlined in LB1173. It is my understanding that part of the reason for the creation of a permanent entity comprised of both those inside and outside government was to alleviate the need to study our child welfare system in perpetuity. LB821, which was a Senator Campbell bill in 2012, created the Children's Commission to develop a statewide strategic plan for child welfare, provide a permanent forum for collaboration across branches of government and other stakeholders, explore financing and

other issues and analyze progress. If the Legislature is to undertake another study of the child welfare system, some attention should be given to the significant work that is done, including why studying the system hasn't resulted in more permanent improvements. In addition, as this committee has heard many times in recent years, privatization of child welfare services is neither inherently good or bad for children and families. It's the way the privatization is done and how it is funded that matters. At this point, Nebraska has demonstrably failed to do privatization, privatization efforts with fidelity in a way that benefits children and families and it has cause additional harm, not once but twice in the past decade. As such, the Legislature should also move forward at this point with removing the privatization pilot in statute, as has been recommended to this committee by various stakeholders. If the committee moves forward with LB1173, we hope that there will be significant attention given to learning from the failure of previous efforts in this space and attempts to ensure that there are mechanisms in place for true accountability to ensure that our child welfare system doesn't continue to repeat patterns that are harming vulnerable children and families. Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Thank you. Are there questions? Senator Walz.

**WALZ:** Thanks. I'm just kind of curious if you can expand on this a little bit. You said if the Legislature is to undertake another study of child welfare, welfare system some attention should be given to a significant work already done in this regard, including why studying the system hasn't resulted in more significant improvements. Can you just expand on that a little bit?

**AUBREY MANCUSO:** So, yeah, so I would never presume to speak for former Chairwoman Campbell, but I think her intention in setting up the Children's Commission was really-- Nebraska kind of has a long history of undertaking these type of studies of the child welfare system and then coming to another crisis point and then undertaking another study. And so I think her intention in setting up the Children's Commission was really to get out of that pattern and have some sort of permanent entity to carry forward different reforms, make recommendations to the Legislature, which the Children's Commission does. They also have a significant number of work groups. This was put in place ten years ago, so I think there's always ways to improve that and improve how it's working. But I've, I've legitimately been to this exact same hearing ten years ago. I, I reread a lot of the transcripts and the study in preparation for this hearing, and I-- so I'm just encouraging the Legislature to think a little bit more strategically about how to ensure that whatever barriers are getting in the place in

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the way of the previous reforms being effective to, to think about how to strategically overcome those and not just start from a place where we started from ten years ago.

**WALZ:** OK. I, I appreciate that. Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Any additional questions? Senator Cavanaugh.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Thank you. Thank you for being here. You also mentioned removing privatization pilot in statute. So we know that current privatization is ending and, and, and transitioning in. Could you speak to a little bit more as to why that's the perspective for Voices?

**AUBREY MANCUSO:** Yeah. So historically, Voices for Children has never been supportive of or opposed to privatization. It's a tool, and it's all about how it's done. But I think at this point, having seen privatization efforts fail in Nebraska twice in the, in the past decade, it seems like we need to close that door until we can figure out some other strategic questions, and I think leaving that language in place just creates some ambiguity about the future there.

**M. CAVANAUGH:** Yeah, so if we-- well, we'll have a new administration next year. So leaving that in place, I suppose, would give them ambiguity. So thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Any additional questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**AUBREY MANCUSO:** Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Invite the next neutral testifier. Good afternoon.

**LAURA OPFER:** Good afternoon, Senator Williams and HHS Committee members. My name is Laura Opfer, L-a-u-r-a O-p-f-e-r, and I'm the policy analyst for the Nebraska Children's Commission. On behalf of the commission, I'm testifying in a neutral capacity today on LB1173. First, I want to thank members of the HHS Committee for your attention to the Eastern Service Area during this critical time. For those of us in it from the beginning, this has been a long 12-plus years. And as difficult as the last couple of years especially have been, we are grateful to have some resolve and hope to see the Eastern Service Area continue stabilizing over the coming years. To echo what was just shared from Voices, the Children's Commission was a product of the 2011 LR37, which was an investigation by the HHS Committee that identified a number of gaps in the service delivery model for children

and families. In 2012, we were created by the Legislature to provide a permanent leadership forum for the collaboration of child welfare and juvenile justice, and to devise a strategic plan for child welfare system reform. I wanted to share specifically a few excerpts from that, that parallel LB1173. I think it's important for us again to kind of revisit what happened ten years ago as we move forward. So in section 1, it said: It is the intent of the Legislature in creating the Nebraska Children's Commission to provide a broad restructuring of the goals of the child welfare system and to provide a structure to the commission that maintains the framework of the three branches of government and their respective powers and duties. Section 2 said: The commission should hire a consultant with experience in facilitating strategic planning. Section 4 talked about creating a statewide strategic plan to carry out the legislative intent. So here we are now in 2020 [SIC], a decade later, in the same predicament. The LR29 report refers to several evaluations that related to the Eastern Service Area and were completed at various times throughout privatization. Despite the financial and time costs of these evaluations, the recommendations were consistently not followed resulting in our current situation. Our main concern, to be clear, is that LB1173 would create duplication. The work group created would have a similar purpose as the commission and also involve many of the same people. In addition to the commission, there are other work groups that aim to reform segments of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. LR451 in 2018, which is one of your attachments, is a summary of that LR, that found that there were 21 parent groups, commissions, and task forces in Nebraska related to children, juveniles, and families. And while some of them are not active, most of them are and new ones have been created in addition to that list. One of those groups is the Community and Family Well-Being Transformation Steering Committee, led by Director Beasley since 2020, and I am not a part of that group. Although each group serves its purpose, it would benefit Nebraska to have better coordination and streamlining of strategic work groups prior to pursuing the formation of a new group. To put it clearly, we need to make sense of what we have and leverage our current systems in order to minimize additional spending and maximize efficiency and impact. It is not clear what mechanisms LB1173 would create to sustain strategic planning efforts through a long-term implementation and reform plan. In other words, what happens after December of 2023? The concerning state of the Eastern Service Area was not developed in the short term, and certainly repair will require long-term solutions. While LB1173 outlines an actionable step in resolving issues in the Eastern Service Area, we are concerned about the duplication and lack of long-term

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structure necessary to rebuild and reform not just the Eastern Service Area, but our statewide system of care for children and families. In addition, we have a couple recommendations that we'd like you to consider. The first, which has already been mentioned today. But just to echo that, we'd encourage specific inclusion of the Office of the Inspector General, the Foster Care Review Office, the Nebraska Chapter of Child Advocacy Centers-- Alliance of Child Advocacy Centers, the Children's Commission and we-- we're confident that that will strengthen the bodies and including Nebraska's oversight bodies in that process. In conclusion, I just want to say thank you to Senator Arch and the HHS Committee for your leadership and work on behalf of youth in Nebraska. On behalf of the commission, I urge you to consider this information in the advancement of LB1173. And with that, I'll take any questions.

**WILLIAMS:** Thanks, Miss Opfer. Are there questions? Senator Walz.

**WALZ:** I have a question. So since 2000 and-- I was wrong, 2011 is when the Nebraska Children's Commission was created [INAUDIBLE].

**LAURA OPFER:** That's when the LR was done and then we were created technically in 2012.

**WALZ:** OK. I mean, I, I have to say that I really understand your point of there being some consistency and that we're missing that. And I think it's really important that those organizations, especially the Children's Commission that was created for that purpose, is, is part of this plan. Can you just talk about some of the work that you've done over the past few years? And I know that, you know, we've had different administrations, different DHHS directors, but maybe just some of the work that you have been doing over the past few years?

**LAURA OPFER:** Yeah, absolutely. So the Children's Commission gave roots to the foster care rate reform that has happened since 2012. There's a large restructuring of the foster care rate system. As many of you know, our rate system was really in disarray and had not been updated since the 1990s, which really left us at a crisis point with recruiting and maintaining foster parents. And that was one of those system points that was identified as creating some barriers in our child welfare system, right, if we-- if we're not paying foster parents and reimbursing them adequately, then we certainly aren't receiving the quality of care. So that's one of the major initiatives that the Children's Commission has undertaken since 2012 is the reform of the foster care rate structure. We also gave roots to the Strengthening Families Act. We're involved in that process, and we

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have a committee that monitors the ongoing implementation. We have Juvenile Services Committee. And to kind of point out some of the issues here, there's not a lack of recommendations or ideas about what needs to change. Oftentimes we look within our own groups, our systems, our agencies, and stakeholders. They, they know what needs to happen. Sometimes the problem is we're not always listening. And I think that is what's happened over time occasionally with the Children's Commission and other groups that are making recommendations, and sometimes they're right in front of us. But so are 100 other things, right? And so it's hard to know what to prioritize and pay attention to. And so for an example, in 2012 and 2013, we developed strategic recommendations for juvenile justice. Some of those related to the YRTCs and there wasn't a lot of action taken on those at that time. But here we are in 2022 looking back at an almost ten-year-old report and relying on some of the information in that to inform our decisions now. So that information was relevant then and it's relevant now. And sometimes, you know, we don't always find ways to move those forward at the time. And I think that's part of our struggle.

**WALZ:** Yeah, I agree. Well, thank you so much for coming up.

**LAURA OPFER:** Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Any additional questions? Senator Day.

**DAY:** Thank you, Vice Chairman Williams. And thank you, Miss Opfer, for being here. I appreciate your testimony on behalf of the Children's Commission. I just want to clarify. So you mentioned possibly changing to name the Office of Inspector General, Foster Care Review Office, Nebraska Chapter of Child Advocacy Center-- Advocacy Centers, and the Nebraska Children's Commission within the bill. Do you-- would that be in lieu of hiring an outside consultant or do you feel like the, the additional consultant is still necessary within the process?

**LAURA OPFER:** No, that wouldn't be in lieu of,--

**DAY:** OK.

**LAURA OPFER:** --that would be a suggestion that our oversight bodies are specifically included in any strategic planning moving forward.

**DAY:** OK.

**LAURA OPFER:** And I just wanted to point out, too, on the LR451 Summary and Findings, this back page, does have a diagram of our oversight

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bodies, and it also lists out some of those stakeholder groups that were around in 2018. So that kind of gives us a picture of the people who need to be at the table.

**DAY:** OK. Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Any additional questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**LAURA OPFER:** Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Invite the next neutral testifier. Good afternoon and welcome.

**SARAH HELVEY:** Good afternoon. My name is Sarah Helvey, S-a-r-a-h, last name H-e-l-v-e-y, and I'm a staff attorney and director of the Child Welfare Program at Nebraska Appleseed. I'm here to testify neutrally on LB1173 on behalf of our client, Laura Virgl. That's L-a-u-r-a, last name V-i-r-g-l, who is here with me today. Miss Virgl is the taxpayer plaintiff in Virgl v. Smith, et. al. against the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Administrative Services, and Saint Francis Ministries. I'm attorney of record in that case, and I'm here today to speak publicly on LB1173 in relation to our pending litigation. On behalf of Miss Virgl, we fully support the recommendations of the LR29 special investigative committee after the committee's extensive study of the state's contract with Saint Francis. Among other recommendations that are reflected in LB1173, the special investigative committee also made a clear recommendation to end the Eastern Service Area pilot project. That same recommendation was also made in the longitudinal assessment of child welfare privatization in Nebraska, as well as a special report and investigation of the pilot project by the Office of Inspector General. It's significant that all three of these reports said the exact same thing that the pilot project should end, and ending the pilot project can only be done by the Legislature. However, LB1173 fails to do so. Although HHS and Saint Francis announced a mutual agreement to end the existing contract in December, the pilot project still exists in statute, as does the authority of the department to enter into future contracts for case management services in the Eastern Service Area and Nebraska Revised Statute Section 68-1212(2). That is the subject of Miss Virgl's still pending lawsuit, which alleges that that statute is unconstitutional in that it constitutes special legislation. Specifically, the lawsuit alleges that this statute creates an unequal child welfare system in Nebraska and unjustifiably treats Douglas and Sarpy Counties differently than the rest of the state. Her claim is

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essentially that the Legislature has done and is doing something unconstitutional by allowing the pilot project to exist and to continue. And while her lawsuit is alleging that the department is spending her taxpayer dollars illegally, it's the Legislature's role to set policy and therefore it's the Legislature's job to terminate the department's authority to further privatize case management in the ESA. Even with the current agreement to end the existing ESA contract, the statute still treats the Omaha area differently than the rest of the state because it permits HHS the option to privatize there in the future. Therefore, it's our position the Legislature must strike Section 68-1212(2), as doing so would be consistent with the clear recommendations of the three reports and would result in ending our ongoing lawsuit. It's also necessary to end the pilot project in statute because we've seen that the high turnover in HHS leadership can result in mistakes being repeated and that term limits at the Legislature can result in loss of institutional memory. Countless taxpayer dollars have been spent on this unequal system, and the pilot project must be terminated where it was created, and that's in statute. So for all of these reasons, on behalf of Miss Virgl, we respectfully request that you amend LB1173 to strike Nebraska Revised Statute 68-1212(2) and to terminate the ESA pilot project. To do otherwise would fail to implement the clear recommendations of all three entities that were specifically directed by this committee to evaluate child welfare privatization and would ignore the intent and the purpose of LR29. We sincerely appreciate all of your efforts and your commitment to Nebraska children and families.

**WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Miss Helvey. Are there questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**SARAH HELVEY:** Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Invite the next neutral testifier. Welcome, Miss Carter.

**JENNIFER CARTER:** Good afternoon, Senator Williams and members of the HHS Committee. I was not necessarily-- oh, I should introduce myself. I'm sorry. My name is Jennifer Carter, J-e-n-n-i-f-e-r C-a-r-t-e-r, and I serve as your Inspector General for Nebraska Child Welfare. I was not necessarily planning to testify today because we've obviously completed a report on the pilot project in the Eastern Service Area. But I did want to come up because several people have been kind enough to suggest that we should be included in this process, more specifically, and I just wanted to put on the record that we'd be very happy to do that. We participate in a lot of the committees and commissions in the state, and it certainly helps us do our work to

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understand the direction that the system is going. What is the reasoning behind the changes? So we'd be very happy to do that. And I did want to mention that I'd also like to echo the idea that specific people, particularly those with lived experience, private providers, many that are mentioned in the work group, I think it would be beneficial again for the, for the reason that administrations change. Administrations will change before this process is done to have them more specifically included, rather than just sort of being left to whoever is directing it. I have full faith that Director Beasley would want to bring a very broad group together. She's done that so far in the strategic transformation group, which we've been able to be a part of. So but I think it would help sort of memorialize that and make that expressed in the law. And I also did want to mention that strategic transformation group, because I think that is a great effort right now to bring a broad group together. It's sort of focused a little bit differently in terms of a base level of what are the values that we want in the system? What is the approach to be taken? But it's certainly something to build off on and to the point that a lot of work has been being done by the Children's Commission and others for years and years. I, I don't know, this is sort of off the top of my head, but whether specifically including sort of a task of this group is to figure out how best to coordinate all of that. Because one thing we've discovered in our strategic transformation work is there-- that's part of what's been very valuable to see who's doing what? Where can we leverage that? Where is there duplication? Each branch of government currently has a commission or a committee working on child welfare. We have the, the Children's Commission. We have the commission for the protection of children. The Supreme Court has a commission on child welfare. And so I think figuring out how best to coordinate those efforts could be really helpful because they're all doing great work. A lot of the same people sit on all the same committees, but so I would just echo those thoughts. But just wanted to say we're very, very happy to be included and thank people for suggesting that and I'm happy to take any questions.

**WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Miss Carter. Are there questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**JENNIFER CARTER:** Thank you.

**WILLIAMS:** Are there any additional neutral testifiers? Seeing none, we'll invite Chairman Arch back. And as he's coming up, we do have three letters for the record: two proponents and one neutral testimony. Welcome back, Senator Arch.

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**ARCH:** Thank you. Thank you, Vice Chair Williams. I just want to make a note here before I forget it. This has been great. First of all, I appreciate very much the people that came and offered to participate in this work. It's going to be very important work. I think we recognize it's a heavy lift. We talk about heavy lifts here in the committee a lot. We-- we're, we're in kind of deep into some heavy lifts and, and it is, it is reform that we're seeking. It isn't kicking the can down the road. It isn't just, just doing things and trying harder, but, but really taking a step back and taking a look at this. The role of the consultant is going to be very important in, in the-- in, in that third party that can also gather all of the input and, and, and help synthesize that, keep us all on track. We all have day jobs. The department has got some very large projects that they're working on right now. So that consultant, I think, is, is going to be very, is going to be very important. I want to, I want to, I want to comment particularly on the Nebraska Children's Commission. When, when, when you go back and take a look at the statute that was, that was written as a result of, of, of the work many years ago, 2012, it, it reads that it is the, the commission shall provide a permanent forum for collaboration. And so it was, it was set up to be that opportunity to bring the parties together. Then when it was set, the Governor shall appoint 15 voting members and then there were nonvoting ex-official members included. So the Governor appoints certain members. They, they provide that forum for collaboration. They issue reports. We just had a report come to, to our committee just recently from, from, from, from Miss Ofper as, as here's our recommendations. Then we sit as the Legislature and consider those recommendations. The administration sits and considers those recommendations. However, the structure of the Children's Commission, the, the, the nonvoting ex-official members are chairperson of HHS Committee, Chairperson of Judiciary, Chairperson of Appropriations, three persons from the State Court Administrator, Executive Director of FCRO, Director of Children Family Services, the director of Behavioral Health Division, the Commissioner of Education, Inspector General, it is very similar people involved what we're talking about doing on a strategic planning level, very similar people involved in the Children's Commission. But it's kind of flipped, right? So the nonvoting members, the ex-official members are the ones that will have to implement, the ones that will have to be the decision makers, the ones that will have to fund, the ones that will have to do, do the work then of this. So I would say this, the Children's Commission needs to be a very important part of the process. I don't think that they can replace this what we're proposing here, because I think that the-- this issue of voting and nonvoting members and, and ex-official, I think that's an important

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distinction. So yes, it is, as I say, I'm, I'm very pleased that people have come in and offered their input into the decision making. Much work has been done. We don't want to duplicate the work of the analysis that's been done and we want to take advantage of that. And, and so we'll go back and take a look at the language of this and see if there needs to be some, some adjustments to that. But it's-- I don't think that we're under the illusion, I, you know, hope springs eternal, right? I, I, I sit here and say, it's different. I, I think for one thing, one reason it's different is we have, we have now lived through the crisis of, of the child welfare program. We've, we've struggled with the outcome. We're at a place of some stability right now. Now we need to do that hard work of, of looking forward. And I think we're all motivated to do that. I think you saw that with the testimony from the judicial branch and from the administration branch and now from us as the legislative branch. So with that, I will, I will close and obviously I'll be encouraging the support of this bill.

**WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Chairman Arch. Are there any final questions? Seeing none, thank you, Senator Arch. And that will close the public hearing on LB1173 and close our hearings for the day. Thank you all for coming.