



Nebraska Children's Commission

1225 L Street, Suite 401
Lincoln, NE 68508

August 28, 2025

Brandon Metzler, Clerk of the Legislature
State Capitol, Room 2018
PO Box 94604
Lincoln, NE 68509-4604

Dear Mr. Metzler,

Neb. Rev. Stat. [§ 43-4207](#) requires the Nebraska Children's Commission to provide a written report regarding its activities during the year to the Governor and the Health and Human Services Committee of the Legislature by September 1st of each year.

The attached report provides the progress that has been made from July 2025 through June 2026. The report was reviewed and approved by the Nebraska Children's Commission at the August 11, 2026 Commission Meeting.

Respectfully,

Ron Giesselmann, Vice Chair
Nebraska Children's Commission

Enclosure:
Nebraska Children's Commission Report 2025-2026 (Final)



2025-2026

NEBRASKA CHILDREN'S COMMISSION ANNUAL REPORT

Recommendations to the Governor and the Health &
Human Services Committee of the Legislature

Submitted Pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. § 43-4207



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INTRODUCTION

The Nebraska Children's Commission was established by the Nebraska State Legislature in 2012 to serve as a leadership forum for collaboration on child welfare and juvenile justice reform. The Commission brings together representatives from all three branches of government, as well as public and private stakeholders from across the state, including regional and community members.

The organizational structure includes 26 members, both voting and non-voting, an executive committee, a chairperson, and several statutory committees and Workgroups. Members are appointed to ensure balanced representation from government, system stakeholders, community representatives, and families and youth with lived experiences in child welfare and juvenile justice.

More than 250 stakeholders and community members participate in the Commission's initiatives, which have a significant impact on policy and legislation affecting children and families in Nebraska. This year, the Health and Human Services Committee of the Legislature introduced LB845, a measure which would have eliminated the Alternative Response Advisory Committee of the Commission. This measure would have removed a key oversight mechanism to the screening and assessments of families receiving Alternative or Traditional Response services.

Through a collective response with the Child Advocacy Centers, Nebraska CASA, the Foster Care Review Office, the Inspector General of Child Welfare, and leaders of the Children's Commission, the bill did not advance, and the Alternative Response Advisory committee remains codified in statute.

The Nebraska Children's Commission Annual Report provides a summary of the work accomplished each year by its statutory committees. For more detailed annual reports, please visit: childrens.nebraska.gov/publications.html

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Over the past year, the Nebraska Children’s Commission has continued to advance its mission by convening statutory committees, workgroups, and over 250 engaged stakeholders across government, community organizations, and families. This collective commitment has driven data-informed and equity-focused reforms in the state’s child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Our Strategic Priorities have not been updated since at least spring 2023. We are happy to share that we completed a robust Strategic Planning session, led by Blair Bagley, a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln studying human sciences with a specialization in leadership studies and organizations’ collective impact.

The methodology for updating our strategic plan included a governance survey administered to all voting and ex-officio members, semi-structured individual interviews, and a comprehensive document review of relevant statutes, meeting minutes, and our previous Annual Report. From this process, we are happy to report five strategic recommendations:

1. Invest in member onboarding as a governance priority
2. Rebuild a legislative presence as a Commission priority
3. Develop a “Right People at the Table” protocol
4. Sharpen Strategic Focus for 2026-2028
5. Strengthen administrative infrastructure for commission work

To provide clarity and focus, recommendations for the year are organized around two strategic priorities: **Service Array & Access**, which is aimed at expanding and improving supports for families and youth; and **System Stability & Oversight**, aimed at strong accountability, facility governance, and absorption of advisory functions for more integrated operations.

RECOMMENDATIONS BY COMMITTEE

The Commission is required to provide a written report to include recommendations regarding child welfare priorities and progress towards addressing those priorities. Below are the identified recommendations from each committee within the Commission, which strategic priority that is intended to be addressed, and the page number to the committee summary supporting the recommendation.

Juvenile Services Committee Recommendations:	Strategic Priority	Page # of Report
Pilot a bundled funding model for high-needs youth, including Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (PRTF) waiver services	Service Array and Access	Page 6
Support increased transition planning centered on the family	System Stability and Oversight	Page 8
Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee Recommendations:	Strategic Priority	Page # of Report
Improve and align annual data collection across B2i, Opportunity Passport, and ETV	System Stability and Oversight	Page 11
Strengthen B2i's understanding and relational connections	System Stability and Oversight	Page 12
Explore structured peer engagement opportunities	Service Array and Access	Page 13
Strengthening Families Act Recommendations:	Strategic Priority	Page # of Report
Prioritizing coalition building with Tribal governments & community leaders around both sex and labor trafficking	System Stability and Oversight	Page 16
Continuation of the Normalcy Workgroup	System Stability and Oversight	Page 17

JUVENILE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Nick Juliano & Deb VanDyke-Ries, Co-Chairs

The Juvenile Services Committee (JSC) of the Nebraska Children’s Commission—co-chaired by Deb VanDyke-Ries (Nebraska Court Improvement Project) and Nick Juliano (RADIUS)—presents this annual report as a contribution to state juvenile justice reform, in compliance with Neb. Rev. Stat. § 43-4203.

Historical Context & Operational Transition

In 2017, the JSC and the Nebraska Coalition for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) established a formal partnership involving joint general meetings, shared workgroups, and integrated reporting to eliminate duplication and coordinate reform across the state’s continuum of care. Over the past decade, this collaborative structure allowed both bodies to address critical priorities, align legislative recommendations, and maximize administrative resources.

Following strategic review by leadership from both bodies, the JSC and NCJJ decided to decouple their full general membership meetings and transition back to independent statutory reporting. This shift reflects changes in state funding structures—specifically Nebraska’s updated status regarding federal Title II grant administration under the Nebraska Crime Commission—which returned dedicated administrative and staff capacity to the NCJJ. Independent reporting allows each entity to fulfill its distinct statutory mandates cleanly without administrative overlap.



JUVENILE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Sustained Partnership, Shared Membership, and Communication

Crucially, the conclusion of joint general meetings and unified annual reports does not signal an end to the partnership between the JSC and NCJJ. Instead, both bodies continue to operate with a high degree of structural alignment and shared purpose:

- **Overlap in Stakeholder Representation:** The JSC and NCJJ continue to share significant overlapping cross-membership. Key state agency partners, judicial representatives, and stakeholders, hold positions across groups, ensuring that discussions in one body directly inform the work of the other.
- **Collaborative Workgroups & Initiatives:** Members of both entities continue to sit on joint or aligned subcommittees—such as the Access to Services Workgroup and the Continuum of Care Workgroup—addressing high-utilizer juvenile populations, Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF) funding mechanisms, and Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center (YRTC) facility oversight.
- **Unified Statutory Vision:** Both bodies remain aligned in their commitment to a comprehensive continuum of care, data-driven equity initiatives, and serving as a joint technical resource for the Legislature, Governor, Judicial Branch, and state administrative agencies.

Operating as an independent entity allows the JSC to focus sharply on its core legislative mandates—evaluating out-of-home placements, monitoring system capacity, and advising on behavioral health integration—while maintaining a direct, active line of communication with the NCJJ to ensure Nebraska’s juvenile justice reform efforts remain unified and cohesive.

ACCESS TO SERVICES WORKGROUP

Julie Smith, Chair

The Access to Services Workgroup was formed in 2022 and brings together community experts to examine challenges, identify underlying issues, and develop actionable steps to improve timely access to clinically indicated treatment. Nebraska's current funding mechanism for youth behavioral health services, particularly for Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (PRTF), creates incentives for providers to serve lower-needs youth while youth with high medical and psychiatric complexity are left with limited options to meet their treatment needs. The system's reliance on fee-for-service and fragmented rate structures contributes to a "pick and choose" mentality, leaving the most vulnerable youth underserved and driving up costs for probation and state agencies as they strive to develop alternatives that will meet the complex needs of today's youth.

Overreliance on institutional settings in the current continuum fails to provide essential elements such as individualized care, parental support and skill development, and community integration opportunities. This has been a longstanding concern for policymakers, funders, regulators, and advocates, who have observed that, in many cases, the risks outweigh the benefits.

Over the past two years, the Workgroup has focused on the intersection of funding, service coordination, and accountability, all with the goal of supporting youth with complex needs and promoting equitable access to a full continuum of care. Last year the workgroup identified a potential solution to barriers affecting access to treatment: pilot a bundled funding model for high-needs youth, including Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (PRTF) waiver services.

Launching this program will allow for testing a split-rate funding mechanism for PRTF waiver services. This separates the daily room-and-board rate from the services rate with the long-term goal of moving to an all-inclusive bundled payment. This model should be developed in collaboration with Nebraska Medicaid, the Managed Care Organizations (MCOs), the Administrative Office of Courts and Probation, the Department of Health and Human Services, and other vested interests as an alternative option to meet the treatment needs of youth.

The next step in the initiation of this pilot program is to complete a cost analysis comparing bundled versus fee-for-service models, with specific attention to the cost-effectiveness and quality of outcomes for youth with complex psychiatric and medical needs. We additionally are awaiting the engagement of Medicaid in the design and evaluation phases, including a detailed breakdown of Medicaid and non-Medicaid costs associated with bundled services. To begin this cost analysis, the Workgroup's immediate next step is requesting detailed expenditure data from Nebraska Medicaid.

CONTINUUM OF CARE WORKGROUP

Tammy Sassaman, Chair

In October 2023, the YRTC Workgroup was officially renamed the Continuum of Care Workgroup. Originally, this Workgroup was established to conduct a comprehensive review of the statutory responsibilities related to Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers (YRTCs) and to evaluate the five-year operations plan submitted to the Legislature in accordance with Neb. Rev. Stat. § 43-427. The Workgroup focuses on three primary areas:

Youth Voice

Family Engagement

Accreditation

Pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. § 43-4203(1), the Juvenile Services Committee is tasked to, “review the role and effectiveness of out-of-home placements utilized in the juvenile justice system, including the youth rehabilitation and treatment centers, and make recommendations to the Commission on the juvenile justice continuum of care, including what populations should be served in out-of-home placements and what treatment services should be provided at the centers in order to appropriately serve those populations.” To align with these statutory requirements, the Workgroup has focused on examining YRTCs throughout Nebraska and their treatment services to better understand their current status and needs. The group will continue monitoring YRTCs and other juvenile justice facilities, developing recommendations as findings emerge.

This year, the Continuum of Care Workgroup Chair completed site visits to juvenile facilities statewide. This provided direct assessment of living environments, services, and support provided to youth. These visits allowed the Chair to engage with staff and youth, gain firsthand insights into daily experiences, learn about compliance with standards, and identify both strengths and areas for improvement, and to share that information with the Workgroup.

A consistent concern raised during these visits is that youth often move from one placement to another without essential information following them. Important details are frequently not shared with the new placement until hours or days later, which can be especially critical when they involve medication, suicidality, or past trauma. The workgroup has identified the need for a “Lifebook,” or living file, that contains necessary information and follows the youth across placements.

CONTINUUM OF CARE WORKGROUP

The "Lifebook" serves a far greater purpose than simply being a scrapbook; it stands as an essential resource, offering invaluable support to youths navigating the juvenile justice system. It ensures that youth navigating the juvenile justice system maintain a continuous narrative of their lives, mitigating the "identity erasure" that often occurs during multiple placement transitions. It would aid with maintaining identity, continuity, and empowerment throughout system involvement.

**Continuity: Medical
& Mental Health;
Academic History**

**Identity:
Cultural &
Personal Roots**

**Empowerment: Self-
Narrative Control**

The Workgroup has additionally identified the required documents that ought to be included for transitions (not included in the Lifebook).

- **Official Documents:** Certified birth certificate, Social Security card, and state-issued ID/Driver's license.
- **Health Records:** Comprehensive medical history and proof of health insurance. Comprehensive mental health history.
- **Education History:** Transcripts, diplomas, and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) if applicable.
- **Placement History:** A list of all placements and the contact information of "at least one significant adult" who is not a professional.

The Workgroup recommends a continued evaluation of these "Lifebooks" with a focus on legal compliance and internal policies with involved stakeholders.

BRIDGE TO INDEPENDENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Richard Hasty, Chair

The Bridge to Independence (B2i) Advisory Committee was established pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. § 43-4513 to provide recommendations to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Nebraska Children’s Commission regarding the B2i Program, extended guardianship, and extended adoption assistance.

The B2i Program, implemented in October 2014, supports youth aging out of the child welfare foster care system without achieving permanency. In 2021, the program expanded to include youth aging out of the tribal court system. In 2023, Senator Dungan introduced LB14, which requires that youth in the juvenile justice system who are in a court-ordered out-of-home placement on their 19th birthday receive information about the B2i Program. LB14 was subsequently amended into LB50 through AM1980, mandating DHHS implementation by January 1, 2025. This legislative process reflects a longstanding recommendation of the Committee, whose members remain dedicated to ensuring that B2i is accessible to all youth in out-of-home placement as they transition into adulthood.

In 2025, the Legislature voted to eliminate the Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee with a sunset date of June 30, 2026. However, the Children’s Commission voted to continue the group as a standing subcommittee under its authority. Members have discussed opportunities to increase procedural flexibility while maintaining transparency and public engagement. The Legislature passed LB962, the Youth Reentry and Transitional Support Act, which closely aligns with the goals of the B2i program by strengthening supports for youth transitioning to adulthood.

Workgroups have continued to advance recommendations and review program outcomes. The Data and Evaluation Workgroup, chaired by Heather Wood, reviewed CY2025 Foster Care Review Office Data, which showed continued growth in B2i participation. Transportation, employment, and financial stability remained the most common goals identified by youth, while access to healthcare and safe housing were identified as critical factors influencing successful outcomes.

The Sustainability Workgroup, chaired by Felipe Longoria-Shinn, developed recommendations focused on improving youth engagement and long-term support. Proposed strategies included creating recurring program orientation materials, expanding the use of youth-centered outreach and social media, and encouraging the identification of a supportive adult beyond the Independence Coordinator to promote lasting stability.

The Special Populations Workgroup is exploring opportunities to better serve youth with unique needs, including documented immigrant youth facing barriers related to immigration status and employment authorization. Planning also began to re-engage the workgroup and identify future priorities for addressing service gaps among specialized populations.

DATA AND EVALUATION WORKGROUP

Heather Wood, Chair

The Data and Evaluation Workgroup developed its recommendations through a focused, data-driven review process conducted between October 2025 and July 2026. Chaired by Heather Wood, the workgroup collaborated during regular meetings with stakeholders representing the Foster Care Review Office (FCRO), Children and Family Services (CFS), and system-involved partners. The group utilized recent trends from the FCRO June 2026 Quarterly Report to ground their discussions, ensuring that objective outcome data informed every policy suggestion. Workgroup members examined the intersection of rising congregate care utilization and lower-than-expected Bridge to Independence enrollment among high-acuity youth. By analyzing these placement trends alongside existing service gaps, the group identified actionable recommendations to improve outreach via digital tools and to mitigate the "services cliff" for youth transitioning into adulthood. Final recommendations were developed through consensus-building, transparent discussion, and a careful balancing of statistical evidence with the practical realities of case management.

Additional data suggests an area of focus for promoting the B2i program should include increased attention on youth in more restrictive placement settings as they get closer to their 19th birthday. According to the Foster Care Review Office (FCRO) June 2026 Quarterly Report, there has been an increased use of congregate care placements for Nebraska children and youth in out-of-home care. On March 31, 2026, 12.9% of child-welfare involved youth ages 13–18 were in congregate settings. Despite this growing trend in use of more restrictive placement types, less than 2% of B2i participants reviewed by the FCRO were in a congregate care setting for their last placement in out-of-home care as a minor, indicating a potential lack of knowledge about the B2i program amongst this population.

- Given these data trends, Children and Family Services (CFS) should ensure case managers are utilizing the B2i promotional video and other relevant promotional materials when informing eligible youth about the program, particularly those in more restrictive settings like congregate care. Many of these youth are placed out-of-state, creating further challenges with effectively promoting the program.
- Increased use of restrictive placement types likely reflects more severe clinical acuity for youth in out-of-home care. Understanding that the need for clinical supports does not disappear when a youth ages out of child welfare, CFS should ensure young adults in B2i have access to appropriate clinical supports and services.

SUSTAINABILITY WORKGROUP

Dylan Graeve & Felipe Longoria-Shinn, Co-Chair

The Sustainability and Peer Connections Workgroup developed its recommendations through a collaborative, cross-sector engagement process that took place over approximately eight to nine months, from July 2025 to March 2026. Co-chaired by a youth with lived experience and a community partner, the workgroup convened monthly meetings with stakeholders representing B2i staff, DHHS, youth-serving organizations, CASA, Nebraska Appleseed, and other partners with direct experience supporting prospective, current, and/or former B2i participants. The workgroup intentionally incorporated youth voice throughout the process, including contributions from youth with lived experience who participated in discussions and provided feedback on emerging ideas. Through facilitated dialogue, workgroup members explored the meaning of sustainability for youth exiting B2i, examined challenges related to long-term stability and social connections, and identified recommendations meant to strengthen life outcomes beyond program completion. Recommendations were developed through consensus-building, ongoing stakeholder feedback, transparent discussion, and careful consideration of both professional expertise and lived experience perspectives.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Improve and align annual data collection across B2i, Opportunity Passport (Financial literacy program), and ETV (Education and Training Vouchers) to better track participation, outcomes, and gaps in programs that support long-term sustainability.

Recommendation Description: Data related to participation, persistence, and outcomes are currently collected independently across B2i, OPP, and ETV. This limits our ability to understand how B2i youth engage across programs for which they are eligible—particularly those that strengthen financial literacy, postsecondary access, and career advancement, all of which contribute to long-term sustainability of the B2i participant.

Without aligned data, it is difficult to assess cross-program utilization, referral effectiveness, equity in participation, or cumulative impact. Aligning annual high-level data collection would provide a more comprehensive view of youth engagement across programs, allowing us to identify service gaps, monitor engagement and outcomes in OPP and ETV for B2i participants, which may support improved sustainability beyond B2i involvement. Ideally, data collection would capture ETV and OPP enrollment for youth currently in B2i and, when feasible, for those who have exited B2i to assess longer-term stability and success. This should consider improving OPP survey completion rates from participants – and encouraged by B2i Independence Coordinators – as data may inform outcomes by participants utilizing B2i and other programs simultaneously.

SUSTAINABILITY WORKGROUP

Because OPP and ETV data are already collected for participating youth up to age 26, advancing this recommendation will require a clear, long-term data-sharing agreement between DHHS, Central Plains Center for Services (the OPP and ETV administrator), and Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. This agreement should outline what data will be shared, for how long, costs, and under what access parameters. Stronger alignment across B2i, OPP, and ETV would enhance coordinated referrals, support continuous improvement, and improve our ability to demonstrate system-level impact to stakeholders and policymakers. It may also provide insight into the extent to which B2i youth continue accessing relational supports, such as PALS, beyond formal program involvement.

- **Suggested Recommended Action Step:** We believe it would be beneficial for DHHS, Central Plains, and NCFF to collaborate on developing a long-term agreement for shared data across programs that can be mutually beneficial.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Strengthen B2i understanding and relational connection by revisiting program intake information—at minimum every six months—through a clear, youth-friendly one-page summary.

Recommendation Description: Youth often receive a significant amount of information during intake, which can be overwhelming and difficult to retain—particularly given the transitions and instability many experience when entering B2i. When program expectations and supports are not clearly understood or reinforced, it can negatively affect engagement, participant outcomes, and the strength of the relationship with their Independence Coordinator (IC). Over time, this misalignment can hinder a participant’s ability to successfully reach their goals and exit B2i in a stable and confident manner that supports long-term sustainability.

Developing a concise, accessible one-page overview of key intake information, and intentionally revisiting it at least every six months, would reinforce understanding of program benefits, youth rights and responsibilities, and expectations and clarity on engagement and communication. It would also reinforce goal setting and progress monitoring. Having this overview available as a virtual option on a website could be an alternative way to support easy access and could include more detailed description. This recurring touchpoint should be flexible, align with youth needs, and would essentially function not only as an informational refresher, but also as a structured opportunity to assess and strengthen the IC–youth relationship. It might also support clarity around mutual accountability, addressing disengagement early, and navigating boundary challenges proactively and transparently.

SUSTAINABILITY WORKGROUP

By normalizing these check-ins, the program reinforces transparency, shared expectations, relational trust, and consistent support—key conditions for sustained engagement, personal development, and long-term success.

- Suggested Recommended Action Step: Establish a practice expectation that ICs review and discuss the B2i one-page intake summary and program norms with youth at least every six months—and more frequently when disengagement or boundary concerns arise—to promote shared understanding, relational alignment, and sustained engagement.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Explore structured peer engagement opportunities that strengthen connection among youth, deepen relationships between youth and B2i staff, and inform ongoing program improvement.

Recommendation Description: While individualized staff support remains central to B2i, creating intentional opportunities for youth to connect with one another—both those currently enrolled and those who have successfully exited or aged out of the program—is equally important. Structured peer engagement allows participants to build meaningful bonds, reduce isolation, and empower one another through shared lived experiences. It could also improve opportunities for skill development in budgeting, studying, and career development. Connections between current participants and alumni can be especially powerful, offering real-world perspective, modeling of long-term stability, and tangible examples of success beyond B2i.

When youth engage with peers navigating similar transitions, it strengthens belonging, normalizes challenges, and reinforces persistence—key factors in achieving goals while enrolled in B2i. At the same time, alumni engagement can reinforce leadership identity and continued connection to supportive networks, contributing to sustained success after exit. Learning from other peer engagement work, such as the Connected Youth Initiative’s (CYI) peer engagement model, may help inform development of these opportunities.

Beyond relational benefits, peer spaces can serve a purposeful role in improving the program itself. Bringing youth together to provide feedback, identify barriers, propose solutions, and promote shared accountability shifts participants from service recipients to active contributors in program improvement. Structured opportunities—i.e., peer cohorts, facilitated dialogue sessions, youth advisory groups, alumni panels, mentorship pairings, virtual check-ins, etc.—can create consistent environments for connection, leadership development, and collective problem-solving.

SUSTAINABILITY WORKGROUP

By fostering connection, empowerment, and shared ownership, structured peer engagement can strengthen in-program outcomes while building the confidence, skills, and community ties that support long-term sustainability after youth exit B2i.

- Suggested Recommended Action Step: Pilot small-scale, structured peer engagement opportunities—co-informed by youth with B2i experience and drawing on models such as CYI—that intentionally include both current participants and alumni. Collect feedback on connection, relevance, and impact, and use those insights to refine and scale a sustainable model that strengthens engagement, supports continuous program improvement, and promotes post-exit success.



STRENGTHENING FAMILIES ACT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Ron Giesselmann & Payne Ackerman, Co-Chairs

The Nebraska Strengthening Families Act (SFA) Committee was established as the Normalcy Task Force under the Nebraska Children’s Commission to oversee and advise on Nebraska’s implementation of the Federal Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, Public Law 113-183 (the “Strengthening Families Act” or “SFA”). Nebraska’s SFA, codified in Neb. Rev. Stat. § 43-4702, aligns state policies with federal mandates and reflects recommendations from a broad range of state and community stakeholders.

Throughout the past year, the Committee has worked to fulfill its statutory mandates, which center on reviewing normalcy plans for youth in care, supervising anti-trafficking responses, and making recommendations related to Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) practices. Responding to previous committee guidance, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has continued to provide Transition Youth Advocates in each service area, supporting youth as they move from foster care toward adulthood. During this reporting cycle, Payne Ackerman and Ron Giesselmann served as committee co-chairs, guiding the Committee’s work and priorities.

The Committee’s focus continues to be on efforts to create and/or unify key subcommittees and coalitions around supporting families and children and aligning with changing federal and state policy. Additionally, the committee continues formalizing work on APPLA to ensure comprehensive oversight of all priority areas. These efforts seek to address system-wide challenges—such as service gaps, mental health needs, and poverty—through targeted, collaborative, and innovative approaches.

Recognizing persistent fiscal and operational challenges, the Committee is committed to strengthening engagement with members, state senators, youth, and Nebraska communities. There is a renewed emphasis on rebuilding expertise, increasing authenticity of youth and lived experience voices, and fostering more meaningful community partnership.



TRAFFICKING WORKGROUP

Ron Giesselmann, Chair

The Trafficking Workgroup provides oversight of Nebraska's anti-trafficking efforts, with a special focus on the vulnerabilities of youth to both sex and labor trafficking. Although the Workgroup does not convene regularly, the Workgroup does monitor law enforcement's sex and labor trafficking arrests and the efforts of the Nebraska Attorney General's Office.

As an effort to educate members of the community, the Nebraska Attorney General's Office coordinated a second Human Trafficking Task Force Summit in 2025. It was a diverse crowd at the Summit. Those in attendance represented diverse professions from law enforcement to banking.

Nebraska's Human Trafficking Task Force (HTTF) has been in existence for 10 years. In conjunction with law enforcement and the Human Trafficking Hotline, the HTTF stays very active.

Because of the work of numerous government agencies and the citizens of Nebraska, youth sex and labor trafficking has declined, but it still exists. With the work being done in the Nebraska Attorney General's Office, the collaboration of law enforcement agencies and information from the public, trafficking in Nebraska will continue to decline.

NORMALCY WORKGROUP

Stephanie Bizzarri & Felicia Nelson, Co-Chairs

The Normalcy Workgroup is responsible for overseeing the implementation of Nebraska's Strengthening Families Act, specifically ensuring that youth in state care have access to age-appropriate extracurricular, enrichment, and social opportunities as required by Neb. Rev. Stat. § 43-4706. However, the Workgroup has been largely inactive. Activity was paused pending broader committee decisions and a planned review of the group's future direction by the SFA Committee.

Discussion among the SFA Committee co-chairs reflects the challenges facing the workgroup, as well as the importance of the workgroup's continuation. Conversations focused significantly on the impact of funding cuts, and difficulties passing new funding bills given the state's budget deficit. This fiscal uncertainty directly affects recommendations for supporting families and reflects why funding components of past proposals were considered sticking points.

Emerging priorities include monitoring new legislative requirements impacting the Strengthening Families Act, especially those addressing poverty as a driver of child welfare involvement. The committee also flagged ongoing concerns about whether youth in foster care are receiving adequate mental health support as a core component of normalcy.

The Co-Chairs of the Normalcy Workgroup recommend the continuation of the Normalcy Workgroup and the prioritization of monitoring legislative changes, robust assessment of how poverty impacts risk for system involvement, and thorough evaluation of mental health resources for youth in care. The Co-Chairs additionally recommend a structured and regular meeting schedule, and broad recruitment to restore specialized and lived-experience expertise. By making these changes, the Normalcy Workgroup can reclaim its intended role as a proactive leader for improving outcomes and advancing equity for all youth in Nebraska's child welfare system.

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Monika Gross & Susan Thomas, Co-Chairs

The Alternative Response (AR) Advisory Committee was created in 2020 by LB 1061 under the umbrella of the Nebraska Children’s Commission to examine DHHS’ alternative response to reports of child abuse and neglect, to make recommendations to the Legislature, DHHS, and the Commission regarding four key areas. The four statutory responsibilities include: 1) the receipt and screening of reports of child abuse or neglect by DHHS; 2) the ongoing use of alternative response; 3) the ongoing use of traditional response; and 4) the provision of services within alternative response and non-court-involved cases to ensure child safety.

Early in 2026, LB 845 was introduced in the Legislature. Section 1 of LB 845 would have outright eliminated the AR Advisory Committee. Due to strong opposition at the public hearing, LB 845 was not advanced, and the AR Advisory Committee was not eliminated. The AR Advisory Committee is one of the sole avenues of system oversight and review of alternative response practices and outcomes. Independent structured oversight, transparency, and accountability are especially crucial when it comes to vulnerable populations, such as those involved with the child welfare system.

The AR Advisory Committee met June 5, 2026 to discuss the future direction of the Committee. The Committee reviewed the statutory responsibilities set forth in Neb. Rev. Stat. § 28-712 (2) (a). Committee members discussed questions and concerns they had regarding alternative response, traditional response, the prevention continuum, and family engagement with services. The Committee identified the following priorities to review, analyze, and evaluate over the next year:

- Data and Oversight
- AR Effectiveness and Family Engagement
- Prevention, AR, and Non-Court Continuum
- Services Evaluation

The Committee will meet again in September 2026.

Nebraska Children’s Commission Membership

Member Name	Member Type	Title and Organization	Representation
Jarren Breeling	Voting	Voice and Choice Advocate , DHHS, Division of Children and Family Services	Stakeholder of the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice System
Abigail Fox	Voting	Young Adult	Young Adult previously in Foster Care
Angel Geller	Voting	Lead Family Coordinator , Santee Sioux Nation's Society of Care	Representative of a federally recognized Indian tribe residing within the State of Nebraska
Ron Giesselmann (Vice Chair)	Voting	Executive Director , Masonic-Eastern Star Home for Children	Stakeholder of the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice System
Richard Hasty	Voting	Superintendent , Plattsmouth Community Schools	Stakeholder of the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice System
Sara Hoyle	Voting	Human Services Director , Lancaster County	Stakeholder of the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice System
Clarice Jackson	Voting	President , Voice Advocacy Center	Representative of the Nebraska Commission on African American Affairs
Nancy Lyon	Voting	Executive Director , LyonHeart Equine Assisted Learning	Stakeholder of the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice System
Felicia Nelsen	Voting	Executive Director , Nebraska Foster and Adoptive Parent Association	Stakeholder of the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice System
Melissa Nilges	Voting	Biological Parent	Biological Parent currently or previously involved with the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice System
Lana Temple-Plotz	Voting	Chief Executive Officer , Nebraska Children's Home Society	Stakeholder of the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice System
Susan Thomas	Voting	Court Appointed Special Advocate , Nebraska CASA Association	Stakeholder of the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice System
LaShawn Young	Voting	Attorney , Young & Young Attorneys at Law	Stakeholder of the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice System
Sen. Christy Armendariz	Ex-Officio	Senator , District 18, Nebraska Legislative Council	Designee of the Chairperson of the Appropriations Committee of the Legislature
Dr. Alyssa Bish	Ex-Officio	Director , Division of Children & Family Services, DHHS, Division of Children and Family Services	Director of Children and Family Services Division of DHHS
Lane Carr	Ex-Officio	Policy & Strategic Initiatives Administrator , Nebraska Department of Education/Nebraska Children and Families Foundation	Designee of the Commissioner of the Department of Education
Jennifer Carter	Ex-Officio	Inspector General of Nebraska Child Welfare , Office of Inspector General of Nebraska Child Welfare	Inspector General of Nebraska Child Welfare
Monika Gross	Ex-Officio	Executive Director , Foster Care Review Office	Executive Director of the Foster Care Review Office
Thomas Janousek	Ex-Officio	Deputy Director , DHHS, Division of Behavioral Health	Director of Behavioral Health Division of DHHS
Sen. Glen Meyer	Ex-Officio	Senator , District 17, Nebraska Legislative Council	Designee of the Chairperson of the HHS Committee of the Legislature
Sen. Victor Rountree	Ex-Officio	Senator , District 3, Nebraska Legislative Council	Designee of the Chairperson of the Judiciary Committee of the Legislature
Kari Rumbaugh	Ex-Officio	Deputy Administrator of the Division of Juvenile Services , Administrative Office of Probation	Appointed by the State Court Administrator
Judge Amy Schuchman	Ex-Officio	Separate Juvenile Court Judge , Douglas County Separate Juvenile Court	Appointed by the State Court Administrator
Deb VanDyke-Ries	Ex-Officio	Director , Nebraska Court Improvement Project	Appointed by the State Court Administrator