

2023-2024

# NEBRASKA STRENGTHENING FAMILIES ACT COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT

Recommendations to the Governor, the Health and Human Services Committee of the Legislature, and the Department of Health and Human Services

Submitted Pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. 43-4218



# BACKGROUND

The Nebraska Strengthening Families Act (NSFA) Committee was created as the Normalcy Task Force under the umbrella of the Nebraska Children’s Commission (Commission) to monitor and make recommendations related to Nebraska’s implementation of the Federal Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, Public Law 113-183 (referred to in this document as the “Strengthening Families Act” or “SFA”). Nebraska’s Strengthening Families Act, §43-4702, implements the federal SFA and initial stakeholder recommendations. Both the federal and state SFA represent a culture shift to allow children and youth to grow and thrive in less restrictive, more family-like environments and participate in age and developmentally appropriate activities. Additional legislation related to best practices in implementation was passed as LB225 (2017).

The Committee has met over the last year to accomplish its statutory mandates. The Committee is responsible for fulfilling the Commission’s requirement to review normalcy plans, consider and review trafficking efforts in Nebraska, and make recommendations related to Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) planning. DHHS has implemented a recommendation from previous reports and there are now Transition Youth Advocates in each service area of Nebraska to assist youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood. Payne Ackerman and Ron Giesselmann have co-chaired the committee during this reporting period.

The Committee periodically creates and archives subcommittees depending on their fulfillment of assignments from the Committee. Archived NSFA subcommittees include Trafficking, Community & Family Voice, Grievance Procedure, Training, and Court Implementation, and APPLA. These groups may be called upon, reviewed and/or revived depending on need of the Committee and emerging issues. The Committee identified there are opportunities to improve engagement with members, senators, youth, and community members to further progress on recommendations each year. Previous recommendations regarding DHHS designating Transition Youth Advocates have been adopted by DHHS.

For more information or to get involved, please visit our website: [childrens.nebraska.gov](https://childrens.nebraska.gov), or email [necc.contact@nebraska.gov](mailto:necc.contact@nebraska.gov).

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## STATUTORY CHARGE

The Nebraska Strengthening Families Act (NSFA) Committee shall monitor and make recommendations regarding the implementation in Nebraska of the federal Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, Public Law 113-183, as such act existed on January 1, 2017, and the Nebraska Strengthening Families Act, [Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-4701 to §43-4715].

### Priorities:

1. Continue to monitor the implementation of the federal Strengthening Families Act.
2. Promote normalcy as the foundation to prevent trafficking, address disparate impacts on minorities, and support the successful transition to adulthood.
3. Coordinate implementation with other policy making bodies.

## Strengthening Families Act Recommendations

## Strategic Priority

Normalcy should extend to youth in care in both DHHS and Juvenile Probation systems as appropriate while considering parental preference. The Committee recommends the statutory requirement for Normalcy Plans and Reports pursuant to §43-4706 be amended to include facilities beyond child-care institutions and foster family homes such as psychiatric residential treatment facilities, treatment group homes, or other facilities that may not have a child-care institution contract with Child and Family Services but care for youth.

- Services Array

Every reasonable effort should be made for youth in out of home care to have the opportunity to participate in activities that enhance and maximize normalcy based on their individualized needs.

- Services Array

DHHS should utilize an evidence-informed, strength-based, youth-led intervention for case management that includes older youth best practices. This intervention should incorporate a tested evaluation tool.

- Services Array

## Strengthening Families Act Recommendations

## Strategic Priority

DHHS should address barriers to foster youth attaining a Driver's License.

- Placement Stability and Solutions

Continued efforts be made through pandemic adaptations for children, youth, and foster caregivers to participate in every court hearing through video conferencing or virtual options are recommended.

- Services Array

Nebraska Judicial Branch should track youth and foster caregiver forms to determine common themes or issues. Part of this tracking includes user-friendly ways of returning the forms to the Court prior to the hearing.

- Services Array



# SFA WORKGROUPS

*Normalcy Subcommittee  
Felicia Nelsen and Stephanie Bizzarri, Co-Chairs*

*Purpose:* To monitor the implementation of the Strengthening Families Act, specifically to review the normalcy plans and reports pursuant to §43-4706.

“Every child placed by the department in a foster home or child-care institution shall be entitled to access to reasonable opportunities to participate in age or developmentally appropriate extracurricular, enrichment, cultural, and social activities.” Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-4704

*Activities:* This group issues a survey in attempt to measure progress since the initial implementation of the Nebraska Strengthening Families Act. Since completion of the survey, the Normalcy Subcommittee has continued to meet periodically to review Normalcy Reports.

The Normalcy Subcommittee reviewed Normalcy Plans and Reports for 12 child caring institutions. These child caring institutions provide congregate, non-treatment, placement settings (group homes and shelters) for state wards and youth under the supervision of Juvenile Probation. This component of the Act was passed in 2017 and implemented in child caring institution contracts with DHHS-DCFS in 2018. The Subcommittee collaborated with the Department of Health and Human Services in the development of a standardized format to be used in the reporting process.

During this year's review it was determined that child caring institutes continue to struggle with reporting on three specific areas. There is a lack of examples identifying how each institution provides accommodations for youth outside of ADA requirements. Youth residing in these institutions often times have specific special needs that need accommodations related to schedules or transitions, which could be better documented in their reporting. Individualized plans specific to a child's need is vital for youth residing in these institutions, and the review showed a lack of evidence that institutions across Nebraska are ensuring plans do so. The last area of concern is a lack of action in reducing disproportionality in care. Many reports explained there are efforts to identified how race and ethnicity impact youth in care, but there were not examples shared on what is being done. The subcommittee challenges these institutions to begin action steps to improve the youth experience while in their care by addressing these target areas.

# SFA WORKGROUPS

*Trafficking Subcommittee  
Ron Giesselmann, Chair*

The Trafficking Subcommittee does not regularly meet, however, stats and reports are reviewed by the larger committee. The Children's Commission has started engaging with Nebraska PATH, which stands for Nebraska Partnership Against the Trafficking of Humans, to gain a better perspective of what is happening throughout Nebraska related to anti-trafficking efforts. The Attorney General's office has increased training for professionals and the general public in an effort to bring more awareness and education on how to identify and report human trafficking activity. According to their annual report, they trained 2,900 people in 2023 and also distributed posters at airports, truck stops, and casinos raising awareness and identifying critical resources.

Labor trafficking continues to be a concern for the SFA Committee, and a review of what efforts are happening in Nebraska was completed. Child Advocacy Centers and many nonprofits are available throughout the state to help victims get resources, and again, the Attorney General's office is available. The SFA Committee recognizes that labor trafficking is unique in that when children are engaged in work inappropriate for their age, it is often due to cultural expectations or pressure to help support their families. Traffickers can take advantage of an undocumented child's fear of their family being deported or other legal action related to their immigration status.

The Immigrant Legal Center has been working with the Attorney General's office to determine how to prosecute labor trafficking cases moving forward to prevent companies from further exploit minors. Increasing penalties for child labor law violations and maintaining appropriate laws and statutes that keep children safe will also protect children from labor trafficking.

Bills allowing employers to pay less than minimum wage, open more job categories to youth that subject them to dangerous work conditions, reduce wages based on their age, or allow extended work hours provide opportunities for employers to take advantage of minors in situations where they feel pressure to agree to these. The Committee appreciates the Nebraska Legislature efforts to not advanced bills that would invite the opportunity to capitalize on these children's fear from predatory employers.

# STRENGTHENING FAMILIES ACT COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Member Name	Member Type	Title and Organization	Representation
Payne Ackerman (Co-Chair)	Voting	<b>Former Foster Youth</b> , Project Everlast	young adult currently or previously in foster care
Crystal Aldmeyer	Voting	<b>Assistant VP Transition Services</b> , Nebraska Children and Families Foundation	professional who has relevant practical experience
Stephanie Bizzarri	Voting	<b>Quality Improvement Specialist</b> , Heartland Family Service	representative from a child welfare advocacy organization
Deanna Brakhage	Voting	<b>Program Specialist, Bridge to Independence</b> , DHHS, Division of Children and Family Services	representative of the Executive Branch of Government
Vernon Davis	Voting	<b>Young Adult Previously in Foster Care</b> , Young Adult Previously in Foster Care	young adult currently or previously in foster care
Misty Flowers	Voting	<b>Executive Director</b> , Nebraska Indian Child Welfare Coalition	representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Ron Giesselmann (Co-Chair)	Voting	<b>Executive Director</b> , Masonic-Eastern Star Home for Children	Representative of a child care institution
Brandy Gustoff	Voting	<b>Chief Program Officer</b> , Omaha Home for Boys (Jacobs' Place)	representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Terri Knutson	Voting	<b>Parent</b>	Parent who has experience in the foster care system
Sarah Nixon	Voting	<b>Developmental Disabilities Supervisor</b> , KVC	representative from a child welfare service agency
Denisha Seals	Voting	<b>Former Foster Youth</b>	young adult currently or previously in foster care
Bailey Perry	Resource	<b>Transitional Living Manager</b> , Omaha Home for Boys, Jacob's Place	representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Jeremy Behrends	Ex-Officio	<b>Juvenile Justice Program Specialist</b> , Administrative Office of Probation, Juvenile Services Division	representative from the Juvenile Probation System
Theresa Cusic	Ex-Officio	<b>Project Specialist</b> , Nebraska Court Improvement Project	a representative of the Judicial Branch of government