

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

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 eliminate the Alternative Response Advisory Committee of the Commission. This measure would remove a key oversight mechanism to the screening and assessments of families receiving Alternative or Traditional Response services.

Through a coordinated 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 was promptly defeated, protecting the oversight for Alternative Response.

The Commission and state agencies will continue to engage stakeholders, monitor outcomes and provide input on the Alternative Response program and its screenings.

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

INFORMATION ON TWO STRATEGIC PRIORITIES HERE!!

To provide clarity and focus, recommendations for the year are organized around two strategic priorities:

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 intended to be addressed, and the page number to the committee summary supporting the recommendation.

JUVENILE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Nick Juliano & Deb VanDyke-Ries, Co-Chairs

Deb VanDyke-Ries (Nebraska Court Improvement Project) and Nick Juliano (RADIUS) serve as the co-chairs for the Juvenile Services Committee (JSC).

This joint annual report reflects the continuing commitment of the JSC to juvenile justice reform. This year, leaders of the Juvenile Services Committee and the Nebraska Coalition for Juvenile Justice initiated discussion to separate

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),

create 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 (MCO's), 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.

Since the identification of this pilot program recommendation, the next step is to request expenditure data from 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. Section 43-427. The Workgroup focuses on three primary areas:

1. Youth Voice
2. Family Engagement

3. Accreditation

Pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. Section 43-4203(b), 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 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 continued to examine YRTCs throughout Nebraska and their treatment services to better understand their current status and needs.

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

A consistent concern raised throughout these visits is the environment to which youth return after release. Many youths return to communities and homes that lack support structures or may present risks that contributed to their system involvement. The workgroup has identified the need for a ‘Lifebook’ or living file of necessary and important information for the youth that follows them.

The "Lifebook" is more than a scrapbook; it is a critical administrative and therapeutic artifact. It ensures that children navigating the child welfare system maintain a continuous narrative of their lives, mitigating the "identity erasure" that often occurs during multiple placement transitions. These would aid with maintaining identity, continuity, and empowerment throughout system involvement.

Identity: Cultural & Personal Roots
Continuity: Medical & Academic History
Empowerment: Self-Narrative Control

The Workgroup has additionally identified the required documents that ought to be included for transitions.

- 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.
- 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

Dr. 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 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

Ask Heather for a snapshot of FCRO case reviews of B2i participants, and any other particular relevant demographic insights or data points worth highlighting.

Sustainability Workgroup

Felipe Longoria-Shinn, Chair

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.

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 NCCF 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.

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.

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

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE ADVISORY COMMITTEE (not required to submit annual report, may be good for this year following legislative attempts at elimination)

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.