



2025-2026

JUVENILE SERVICES COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT

Recommendations to the Nebraska Children's Commission and
the Judiciary Committee of the Legislature

Submitted Pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. § 43-4203



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BACKGROUND

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(1).

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.

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.

JUVENILE SERVICES COMMITTEE STATUTORY AUTHORITY

Neb. Rev. Stat. § 43-4203

The commission shall create a committee to examine the Office of Juvenile Services and the Juvenile Services Division of the Office of Probation Administration.

Such committee shall 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.

The committee shall collaborate with the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Juvenile Justice Institute, the University of Nebraska Medical Center, Center for Health Policy, the behavioral health regions as established in Neb. Rev. Stat. § 71-807, and state and national juvenile justice experts to develop recommendations.

The recommendations shall include a plan to implement a continuum of care in the juvenile justice system to meet the needs of Nebraska families, including specific recommendations for a rehabilitation and treatment model.

The recommendations shall be delivered to the commission and electronically to the Judiciary Committee of the Legislature annually by September 1st.



RECOMMENDATIONS

MISSION

Design a comprehensive, accountable, culturally competent, continuum of care in the juvenile justice system that meets the needs of families and youth while maintaining public safety.

GOAL

To work collaboratively with the executive, legislative, judicial, and county branches of government, the Nebraska Children’s Commission (Commission), and other key stakeholders to establish and support the development of the ideal Juvenile Justice system that will prevent children and youth from entering or becoming more deeply involved in the juvenile justice system.

Juvenile Services Committee Recommendations

Strategic Priority

Pilot a bundled funding model for high-needs youth, including Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (PRTF) waiver services

Service Array and Access

Support increased transition planning centered on the family

System Stability and Oversight



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 continued to examine YRTCs throughout Nebraska and their treatment services to better understand their current status and needs.



CONTINUUM OF CARE WORKGROUP

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.

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.

Juvenile Services Committee Membership

Member Name	Member Type	Title and Organization	Representation
Amoreena Brady	Voting	Director , Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation, Juvenile Services Division	Representative of juvenile probation
Sarah Brownell	Voting	Facility Administrator , DHHS, Division of Children and Family Services, Office of Juvenile Services	Representative of the office of juvenile services
Jennifer Carter	Voting	Inspector General of Nebraska Child Welfare , Office of Inspector General of Nebraska Child Welfare	Representative of the Nebraska Children's Commission Member
Beverly Duran	Voting	Teacher , North Platte Public Schools	Advocate group representative
Amy Hoffman	Voting	Director of Juvenile Diversion and Community-Based Aid , Nebraska Commission on Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice	Nebraska Crime Commission representative
Nick Juliano (Co-Chair)	Voting	President & CEO , RADIUS	Treatment placement representative
Judge Denise Kracl	Voting	County Court Judge , Fifth Judicial District	Judge representative
Laura Lemoine	Voting	Deputy Douglas County Attorney , Douglas County Attorney's Office, Juvenile Division	County attorney representative
Dennis Marks	Voting	Attorney , Sarpy County Public Defenders' Office	Defense Attorney Representative
Paige McDowell	Voting	Crisis and Youth Administrator , DHHS, Division of Behavioral Health	Representative of DHHS, Division of Behavioral Health
Patrick Sailors	Voting	Director of Crisis and Residential Services , Child Guidance Center	In-Home Service Representative
Tammy Sassaman	Voting	Executive Director , Nebraska Juvenile Justice Association	Advocate group representative
Vicky Smith	Voting	Service Director , CEDARS Youth Services	Group home/Shelter representative
Deb VanDyke-Ries (Co-Chair)	Voting	Director , Nebraska Court Improvement Project	Representative of the Court Improvement Project
Dr. Richard Wiener	Voting	Bessey Professor of Psychology , University of Nebraska, Lincoln	Data expert representative
Shaylee Fortner	resource	DHHS Program Manager II , DHHS, Division of Children and Family Services	Representative of the office of juvenile services
Bethany Nelson	resource	DHHS Program Coordinator , DHHS, Medicaid and Long-Term Care	Representative of DHHS, Division of Medicaid and Long-Term Care
Sen. Victor Rountree	resource	Senator , District 3, Nebraska Legislative Council	Representative of the Judiciary Committee of the Legislature
Julie Smith	resource	Juvenile Justice Programs Specialist , Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation, Juvenile Services Division	Representative of Juvenile Probation