



2025-2026

NEBRASKA STRENGTHENING FAMILIES ACT COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT

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

Submitted Pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. § 43-4716



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

01 Background

02 Recommendations

03 Trafficking Workgroup

04 Normalcy Workgroup

**05 Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement
(APPLA) Workgroup**

06 Membership List

BACKGROUND

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.

For more information or to get involved, please visit our website at childrens.nebraska.gov or email necc.contact@nebraska.gov.

RECOMMENDATIONS

MISSION

Monitor and make recommendations on 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 Committee 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 3
Continuation of the Normalcy Workgroup	System Stability and Oversight	Page 4



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 Nelsen, 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.



APPLA WORKGROUP



Payne Ackerman, Chair

This workgroup is a collaborative, youth-centered initiative designed to address the unique challenges faced by youth transitioning out of care. It is particularly focused on supporting those with Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) permanency goals or those exiting care without traditional permanency, such as adoption or reunification. The primary mission of the workgroup is to create pathways and ensure long-term success in independent living, employment, and continued education. To achieve this, the workgroup will address service gaps, develop targeted resources, and advocate for supportive policies and best practices at all levels of government.

Guided by the voices of youth and informed by lived experiences, the workgroup develops innovative programs, services, resources, and policies to build a comprehensive framework of aftercare supports. This framework is designed to empower youth, dismantle systemic barriers, and promote long-term stability. By leveraging partnerships across public, private, and nonprofit sectors and amplifying the perspectives of those with lived experience, the workgroup strives to foster independence, stability, and success for young adults leaving the child welfare system as they transition into productive and fulfilling lives.

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES ACT COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Member Name	Type	Title and Organization	Representation
Payne Ackerman (Co-Chair)	Voting	Former Foster Youth , Project Everlast	Young adult currently or previously in foster care
Crystal Aldmeyer	Voting	Vice President of Connected Youth Initiative Nebraska Children and Families Foundation	Professional who has relevant practical experience
Stephanie Bizzarri	Voting	Foster Care Review Specialist , Foster Care Review Office	Representative from a child welfare advocacy organization
Deanna Brakhage	Voting	Program Specialist, Bridge to Independence , DHHS, Division of Children and Family Services	Representative of the Executive Branch of government
Misty Flowers	Voting	Diligent Recruitment Advisor , Diligent Recruitment	Representative from a child welfare advocacy organization
Ron Giesselmann (Co-Chair)	Voting	Executive Director , Masonic-Eastern Star Home for Children	Representative of a child care institution
Bailey Perry	Voting	Transitional Living Manager , Omaha Home for Boys, Jacobs' Place	Representative from an agency providing independent living services
Fannye Placke	Voting	Foster Care Supervisor , KVC	Representative from a child welfare service agency
Denisha Seals	Voting	Former Foster Youth	Young adult currently or previously in foster care
Jeremy Behrends	Ex-Officio	Juvenile Justice Program Specialist , Administrative Office of Probation, Juvenile Services Division	Representative from the Juvenile Probation System
Theresa Cusic	Ex-Officio	Project Specialist , Nebraska Court Improvement Project	A representative from the Judicial Branch of government
Monika Gross	Ex-Officio	Executive Director , Foster Care Review Office	Executive Director of the Foster Care Review Office