

Health and Human Services Committee

October 13, 2016

Sarah Helvey Testimony, Normalcy Taskforce

Good Afternoon, Chairperson Campbell and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Sarah Helvey (S-A-R-A-H H-E-L-V-E-Y), and I am testifying today as the co-chair of the Normalcy Taskforce, and not in my capacity at Nebraska Appleseed.

I will start with a brief background on the Strengthening Families Act (SFA). In September of 2104, Congress unanimously passed the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act. Last legislative session, Nebraska implemented this federal Act through LB 746, the Nebraska Strengthening Families Act (NSFA).

A key focus of the NSFA, consistent with the federal act, is to promote “normalcy” for youth in out of home placements by enhancing access to “age and developmentally appropriate extracurricular, enrichment, cultural, and social activities.” We know that these every day childhood experiences, like playing on a soccer team, having a sleepover with friends, and getting a part-time job, are actually important to children’s social development. The SFA and NSFA seek to remove barriers in the system for kids to access these experiences. Specifically, the SFA promotes normalcy through the creation of the “reasonable and prudent parent standard,” also called RPPS, which allows foster parents to use their best judgement in making day-to-day decisions for youth in their care, including giving permission and approval for the youth to participate in certain activities.

Secondly, the SFA and NSFA also includes provisions involving transition planning for adulthood for youth starting at age fourteen (previously age sixteen). These provisions seek to empower youth to engage in planning their own futures and to identify the services needed to transition to a successful adulthood when leaving foster care.

Third, the SFA and NSFA require caseworkers to provide youth over the age of fourteen with a document that describes a list of basic rights and to explain the rights to them in a developmentally appropriate manner. This is important because it lets youth know that they have certain rights and that they are empowered to have their rights respected and their voices heard.

Fourth, the SFA and NSFA requires that youth are provided a packet of vital personal documents and information about resources to assist them prior to aging out of foster care. Youth who leave foster care without these documents often face barriers when applying for jobs, seeking housing, and applying for college or other programs.

Taken together, the provisions in the Nebraska Strengthening Families Act create a positive culture change to empower caregivers, youth, and families and to improve outcomes for young people in care. In order to implement these provisions well and so that they have their intended impact, it is necessary to collaborate with stakeholders from all three branches of government, providers and child advocacy agencies, families, current and former foster youth, and the community. For this reason, the Normalcy Taskforce was created by LB 746 to sit under the Nebraska Children’s Commission as a stakeholder body with diverse representation from all of these groups. This past session, LB 746 codified the federal

Strengthening Families Act into Nebraska Statutes and implemented a set of initial stakeholder recommendations. However, it was identified that further recommendations were needed to address additional areas related to the implementation of the Nebraska Strengthening Families Act and that has been a focus of the Taskforce's work to date.

The Normalcy Taskforce has met twice in its official capacity and will meet once more in 2016. In order to make thorough recommendations through a collaborative and flexible process, the Taskforce uses Subcommittees focused on specific identified priorities. An incredible amount of work has been done by the Taskforce and its subcommittees. In all, over 100 individuals are involved and engaged, with a diverse range of members who give their time and expertise to ensuring the successful implementation of Nebraska's Strengthening Families Act. Today you will hear from each of the Taskforce subcommittee's leadership with more specific recommendations and updates. The Taskforce's full annual report will be available in November.

I would like to thank Senator Howard for introducing this Legislative Resolution and Senator Campbell for your leadership and commitment to this issue through LB 746.

I would be happy to answer any questions.