

March 19, 2025

Members of the Nebraska State Legislature
Nebraska State Capitol
PO Box 94604
Lincoln, NE 68509

**In Opposition to LB 556: Change jurisdiction of juvenile courts
and adult criminal courts under the Nebraska Juvenile Code**

Dear Senators:

On behalf of Strategies for Youth, a national training and policy organization dedicated to ensuring the best possible outcomes for youth who interact with law enforcement, I write to strongly oppose language in LB556 that would lower the age at which youth could be tried as adults from 14 to 11.

Over the past 10 years, SFY has trained several hundred law enforcement officers in Omaha and Lincoln, among other agencies across the state, and offered prevention programming for youth. We have had the privilege of working with many committed, caring law enforcement officers in Nebraska.

In view of our extensive on-the-ground experience training Indiana law enforcement officers, and our knowledge of best practices regarding effective policing of youth, I can assure the Legislature **that LB556 will not provide law enforcement with an “interventional” tool** “to protect youth and to promote community safety while ensuring our juvenile justice system functions as it should.” It will not reduce the recent uptick in juvenile crime; in fact, it is likely to have the opposite effect.

First, I question **how, exactly, this “tool” could be used with 11, 12 and 13 year olds**. Would deputies tell youth about the risk of transfer to adult court once they’ve arrested them? We know that using threats of capital punishment and life without parole does not deter adults; why would the possibility of transfer to adult court work better with children who have little understanding of what that means?

Second, will the possibility of transfer to adult court be used as a tool to coerce youth during interrogations? Wouldn’t most juvenile defenders move

to suppress such statements, and wouldn't most judges agree that this coercive strategy would be unacceptable?

In short, it's not clear that transfer to adult court could prevent youth involvement in acts of violence, if officers can only invoke such threats after the fact.

Instead, we strongly recommend that legislators consider an alternative approach. Take, for example, Bibb County, Georgia, which faced a proportionately higher juvenile homicide rate than Omaha, with similar factors including access to firearms, poverty, and poor investment in supports for youth. There, city leaders convened an anti-violence task force which led to a significant and remarkably speedy decline in youth violence.

Sheriff David Davis supported efforts to engage youth living "in risk" who were most vulnerable to impulsive actions and peer influence, in youth-serving organizations that could provide them with stability, investment, supervision, and caring adults. By providing the most exposed and least protected youth who felt like "no one has my back" with consistent guidance from such adults, juvenile violence plummeted.

Until such tested and effective intervention and prevention strategies have been implemented in a sustained manner by Douglas County public safety officials, we recommend the Nebraska Legislature reject the simplistic solution of transferring youth to adult courts. We note that when similar proposals were promoted nearly 20 years ago, their strongest critics were the American Correctional Association and the American Probation and Parole Association. Both organizations noted that their facilities are not able to accommodate children, and the risk of rape, attacks and suicide make it impossible to protect youth or keep them alive. These outcomes are neither preventative nor interventional; they certainly do provide trauma and the need to use aggression to protect oneself during incarceration. They do not rehabilitate children or help them to lead more productive lives upon their release.

Finally, we urge the Nebraska Legislature to consider that, by enacting LB556, it will become a national outlier. The majority of state legislatures accept the reality that children, especially vulnerable ones, struggle to block impulsive reactions, rarely understand the consequences of their actions, and take the path of least resistance when scared, coerced, and threatened. Enactment of this bill would suggest that Nebraska chooses to ignore this accepted evidence from decades of experience across the country.

Nebraska's law enforcement officers need and deserve better "tools" than what is provided in this bill. The state's children need and deserve better treatment. Nebraska has an opportunity to learn from the examples of other

states and promote more effective law enforcement strategies to support both its most vulnerable young people and its law enforcement officers.

Thank you for reviewing this letter. Please feel free to contact me at lht@strategiesforyouth.org or at 617-714-3789. We are happy to assist the state legislature in ensuring more effective strategies for reducing youth violence and for equipping its law enforcement officers with prevention "tools."

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lisa H. Thureau". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lisa H. Thureau, Esq.
Executive Director