



October 5, 2021

Senator John Stinner, Chair
Members of the Appropriations Committee
Nebraska Legislature

Re: LR178, LR179

Senator Stinner and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

I am offering testimony on LR178 and LR179 in my capacity as director of First Five Nebraska, a nonpartisan early childhood policy organization focused on promoting high-quality early care and learning experiences for our state's youngest children and economic opportunity for all Nebraskans. I would like to thank Senator Anna Wishart and Senator Machaela Cavanaugh for introducing these interim studies to allow for comment on using funds made available to our state through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021.

Nebraska's child care workforce is essential to the state's economy and serves as a linchpin in both our continuing recovery from the pandemic and as part of a longer-term economic growth strategy. Access to affordable, high-quality child care enables more of Nebraska's parents to participate gainfully in the workforce and broadens the talent pool available to employers statewide. However, the child care industry itself was one of the hardest hit by the pandemic, which amplified fundamental weaknesses in our state's early childhood infrastructure. These weaknesses largely stem from low levels of compensation and a lack of professional and financial supports necessary to make early childhood education a rewarding career path and ensure the operational viability of quality child care programs.

These obstacles have led to significant attrition in our state's early childhood workforce. This corresponds to a widening gap between the number of child care spots available and the number of children ages 0 to 5 years who would potentially need care if their parents were to return to the workforce. Prior to the pandemic, the gap between the number of child care spots available and the number of children ages 0 to 5 who potentially needed care was 12.3% in metropolitan areas and 30.4% in rural areas (*Bipartisan Policy Center, Child Care Gap Assessment, 2021*), for a statewide total of 20,740 children below kindergarten age. Since then, the number of licensed child care providers has decreased by 7.4% as of September 2021.

We must take urgent steps to first stabilize, then sustain our early childhood infrastructure if we are to avoid cascading losses to Nebraska's economy, marketability and overall quality of life. Over the past several months, First Five Nebraska has gathered input from child care professionals and related stakeholders on the best use of ARPA funds to shore up our early childhood system. Our analysis clearly indicates that any

solutions must begin and end with child care workers and we must prioritize recruiting, training and retaining our professional early childhood workforce.

Attached to the testimony I've offered today, First Five Nebraska has provided a brief with recommended uses for ARPA funds that we believe will not just result in supporting the early childhood workforce, but all working parents in Nebraska. We look forward to continuing to be a resource to the Legislature on the strategic uses of ARPA funds in the care and development of our youngest children to better support the social and economic vitality of Nebraska as a whole.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason Prokop". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jason" and the last name "Prokop" clearly legible.

Jason Prokop
Director
First Five Nebraska