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LB1203 proposes using ARPA dollars to strengthen Nebraska's early childhood system

LINCOLN, NE—Senator Tom Briese (District 41) introduced LB1203 in the Nebraska Legislature today, calling for an investment of federal economic relief dollars to strengthen multiple aspects of the state's early childhood system. Under the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021, Nebraska is receiving over \$1 billion in one-time funding to support public health initiatives, offset the negative economic effects of the pandemic and invest in core infrastructure, among other uses. LB1203 proposes to distribute approximately \$100 million of Nebraska's ARPA funds across 15 projects and initiatives focused on attracting and retaining more talent in the early childhood professional workforce, increasing the business viability of child care programs and other efforts.

The proposed legislation is largely a response to the growing importance of Nebraska's child care industry as a key element in the state's overall infrastructure, and an awareness of the vulnerability of child care businesses to social and economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the bill addresses factors that are widening the gap between available slots in child care programs and the needs of families with young children. That gap reflects the lack of financial stability and supports necessary to make child care a practical career option for early childhood professionals.

"Nebraska consistently ranks among the top five states in the nation for the percentage of children age 0-5 who have all available parents in the workforce," said Elizabeth Everett, deputy director and public policy manager for First Five Nebraska, a statewide early childhood policy organization that worked with Senator Briese on the legislation. "We can't afford to lose any professionals who are willing and qualified to deliver quality early care and education services in all parts of our state. But as of last September, Nebraska saw 7.4% attrition in all licensed child care programs since 2019. ARPA funds give us a realistic foothold to slow and eventually reverse that trend."

The proposed investments of ARPA funds outlined in LB1203 build upon recommendations First Five Nebraska presented to the Legislature's Appropriations Committee in October, 2021. They include:

- Fund early childhood recruitment and retention allowances through the Nebraska Department of Education to more effectively anchor professional talent in the state's early childhood workforce
- Increase child care capacity in areas of need by conducting a child care landscape study, planning and implementing expansion and start-up of child care programs, and other measures

- Alleviate the burden of child care subsidy copayments for families and cover lost income of child care providers
- Sustain the online Child Care Referral Network that helps parents locate open child care slots in programs in communities throughout the state
- Deliver business training to child care providers in both English and Spanish
- Fund fingerprinting and background checks for licensed and license-exempt child care programs and staff
- Expand the Nebraska Department of Education’s Scholarship Project to cover the costs of a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential and other trainings
- Expand the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Nebraska program, which helps students complete coursework in pursuit of an early childhood education degree

“We depend on Nebraska’s hard-working parents and employers to keep our communities and economy working,” said Briese. “And those parents and employers depend on our hard-working child care professionals who make it possible for Nebraska to field a productive statewide workforce. We can’t afford to overlook this significant, unique opportunity to shore up our early childhood system and put us on better footing to move forward in the right direction.”

About First Five Nebraska

First Five Nebraska (FFN) is a non-partisan public policy organization established in 2011 to strengthen the state’s early childhood system as a key driver of social, educational and economic opportunity for all Nebraskans. FFN works with officials in local, state and federal government, business and economic leaders, early childhood professionals and other stakeholders to identify, research and promote well-informed, fiscally responsible policies and solutions addressing the care, education and healthy development of young children at home or in out-of-home settings. For more information, visit www.FirstFiveNebraska.org.