



Nebraska Children's Commission
1225 L Street, Suite 401
Lincoln, NE 68508

August 23, 2023

Brandon Metzler, Clerk of the Legislature
State Capitol, Room 2018
PO Box 94604
Lincoln, NE 68509-4604

Dear Mr. Metzler,

Neb. Rev. Stat. [§43-4218\(4\)](#) requires the Strengthening Families Act Committee of the Nebraska Children's Commission (Commission) to provide a report to the Health and Human Services Committee of the Legislature, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, and the Governor by September 1st each year, regarding initial and ongoing implementation of the federal Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act and related efforts to improve normalcy for children in foster care and related populations. The Commission reviewed and approved the attached report at their August 8, 2023 meeting.

Respectfully,

Misty Flowers, Chair
Nebraska Children's Commission

Payne Ackerman, Co-Chair
Strengthening Families Act Committee

Ron Giesselmann, Co-Chair
Strengthening Families Act Committee

Enclosure:
Strengthening Families Act Committee Annual Report 2022-2023 (Final)

2022-2023

NEBRASKA STRENGTHENING FAMILIES ACT COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT

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

Submitted Pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. 43-4218



BACKGROUND

The Nebraska Strengthening Families Act (NSFA) Committee was created as the Normalcy Task Force under the umbrella of the Nebraska Children’s Commission (Commission) to monitor and make recommendations related to Nebraska’s implementation of the Federal Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, Public Law 113-183 (referred to in this document as the “Strengthening Families Act” or “SFA”). Nebraska’s Strengthening Families Act, §43-4702, implements the federal SFA and initial stakeholder recommendations. Both the federal and state SFA represent a culture shift to allow children and youth to grow and thrive in less restrictive, more family-like environments and participate in age and developmentally appropriate activities. Additional legislation related to best practices in implementation was passed as LB225 (2017).

The Committee has met quarterly for the last year to accomplish its statutory mandates. The Committee is responsible for fulfilling the Commission’s requirement to review normalcy plans, consider and review trafficking efforts in Nebraska, and make recommendations related to Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) planning. DHHS has implemented a recommendation from previous reports and there are now Transition Youth Advocates in each service area of Nebraska to assist youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood. Misty Flowers, Payne Ackerman, and Ron Giesselmann have co-chaired the committee during this reporting period.

The Committee periodically creates and archives subcommittees depending on their fulfillment of assignments from the Committee. Archived NSFA subcommittees include Trafficking, Community & Family Voice, Grievance Procedure, Training, and Court Implementation. These groups may be called upon, reviewed and/or revived depending on need of the Committee and emerging issues. During FY 2022, the SFA Committee completed a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Analysis to determine what areas within SFA could be strengthened. The Committee identified there are opportunities to improve engagement with members, senators, youth, and community members to further progress on recommendations each year. Previous recommendations regarding DHHS designating Transition Youth Advocates have been adopted by DHHS.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

STATUTORY CHARGE

The Nebraska Strengthening Families Act (NSFA) Committee shall monitor and make recommendations regarding 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 Recommendations

Strategic Priority

Normalcy should extend to youth in care in both DHHS and Juvenile Probation systems as appropriate while considering parental preference. The Committee recommends the statutory requirement for Normalcy Plans and Reports pursuant to §43-4706 be amended to include facilities beyond child-care institutions and foster family homes such as psychiatric residential treatment facilities, treatment group homes, or other facilities that may not have a child-care institution contract with Child and Family Services but care for youth.

- Services Array

Every reasonable effort should be made for youth in out of home care to have the opportunity to participate in activities that enhance and maximize normalcy based on their individualized needs.

- Services Array

DHHS should utilize an evidence-informed, strength-based, youth-led intervention for case management that includes older youth best practices. This intervention should incorporate a tested evaluation tool.

- Services Array

Strengthening Families Act Recommendations

Strategic Priority

DHHS should address barriers to foster youth attaining a Driver's License.

- Placement Stability and Solutions

Continued efforts be made through pandemic adaptations for children, youth, and foster caregivers to participate in every court hearing through video conferencing or virtual options are recommended.

- Services Array

Nebraska Judicial Branch should track youth and foster caregiver forms to determine common themes or issues. Part of this tracking includes user-friendly ways of returning the forms to the Court prior to the hearing.

- Services Array



SFA WORKGROUPS

*Normalcy Subcommittee
Felicia Nelsen and Stephanie Bizzarri, Co-Chairs*

Purpose: To monitor the implementation of the Strengthening Families Act, specifically to review the normalcy plans and reports pursuant to [§43-4706](#).

“Every child placed by the department in a foster home or child-care institution shall be entitled to access to reasonable opportunities to participate in age or developmentally appropriate extracurricular, enrichment, cultural, and social activities.” [Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-4704](#)

Activities: This group issues a survey in attempt to measure progress since the initial implementation of the Nebraska Strengthening Families Act. Since completion of the survey, the Normalcy Subcommittee has continued to meet periodically to review Normalcy Reports.

The Normalcy Subcommittee reviewed Normalcy Plans and Reports for 13 child caring institutions. These child caring institutions provide congregate, non-treatment, placement settings (group homes and shelters) for state wards and youth under the supervision of Juvenile Probation. This component of the Act was passed in 2017 and implemented in child caring institution contracts with DHHS-DCFS in 2018. The Subcommittee collaborated with the Department of Health and Human Services in the development of a standardized format to be used in the reporting process.

During this year's review it was determined that child caring institutes continue to struggle with reporting on three specific areas. There is a lack of examples identifying how each institution provides accommodations for youth outside of ADA requirements. Youth residing in these institutions often times have specific special needs that need accommodations related to schedules or transitions, which could be better documented in their reporting. Individualized plans specific to a child's need is vital for youth residing in these institutions, and the review showed a lack of evidence that institutions across Nebraska are ensuring plans do so. The last area of concern is a lack of action in reducing disproportionality in care. Many reports explained there are efforts to identified how race and ethnicity impact youth in care, but there were not examples shared on what is being done. The subcommittee challenges these institutions to begin action steps to improve the youth experience while in their care by addressing these target areas.

SFA WORKGROUPS

*APPLA Subcommittee
Crystal Aldmeyer, Chair*

The APPLA Subcommittee has begun uncovering the barriers behind foster teens being able to obtain their driver's licenses. This group will first compile results of a survey sent to foster parents to provide some insight on the issues they have encountered in assisting foster teens. Future work includes finding solutions to the barriers and providing those recommendations to the legislature and DHHS.



*Trafficking Subcommittee
Ron Giesselmann, Chair*

The Trafficking Subcommittee has not regularly met this year but did meet once to discuss work being done in Nebraska. Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, Child Advocacy Centers, Nebraska State Patrol, and DHHS are all actively engaging in work to prevent and identify youth trafficking. The group plans to meet biannually to review current efforts and will meet more frequently should the need for active review occur.

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES ACT COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Member Name	Member 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	Assistant VP Transition Services , Nebraska Children and Families Foundation	professional who has relevant practical experience
Stephanie Bizzarri	Voting	Quality Improvement Specialist , Heartland Family Service	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
Vernon Davis	Voting	Young Adult Previously in Foster Care , Young Adult Previously in Foster Care	young adult currently or previously in foster care
Misty Flowers	Voting	Executive Director , Nebraska Indian Child Welfare Coalition	representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Ron Giesselmann (Co-Chair)	Voting	Executive Director , Masonic-Eastern Star Home for Children	Representative of a child care institution
Brandy Gustoff	Voting	Chief Program Officer , Omaha Home for Boys (Jacobs' Place)	representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Terri Knutson	Voting	Parent	Parent who has experience in the foster care system
Sarah Nixon	Voting	Developmental Disabilities Supervisor , KVC	representative from a child welfare service agency
Denisha Seals	Voting	Former Foster Youth	young adult currently or previously in foster care
Bailey Perry	Resource	Transitional Living Manager , Omaha Home for Boys, Jacob's Place	representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
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 of the Judicial Branch of government