

Health and Human Services Committee

LB 343

February 20, 2013

Jodi Fenner, Division of Developmental Disabilities Department of Health and Human Services

Good afternoon, Senator Campbell and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. I am Jodi Fenner (J-O-D-I F-E-N-N-E-R), the director of the Division of Developmental Disabilities. I am here to support LB343.

On October 5, 2010, Rosa's Law was signed into federal law, removing the terms "mental retardation" and "mentally retarded" from federal health, education and labor policy and replacing them with people- first language (such as "individual with an intellectual disability" and "intellectual disability.") Currently, all but seven states have taken action to reduce or eliminate the use of the R word in state laws.

Decades ago, the terms moron, imbecile, and idiot were acceptable clinical terms used to describe people with developmental disabilities. Those terms, similar to the terms "retard" or "retardation," have devolved in our common language and are generally used as offensive slang and insults. Unlike the terms moron, imbecile and idiot, however, we still use the term mental retardation to describe people with developmental disabilities in Nebraska.

People with developmental disabilities in Nebraska have true value to our society. They are cherished family members and friends. They have meaningful jobs and contribute through volunteer and social activities in our communities. They are people, just like you and I, who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

Often, people who use the R word do so without really understanding that they are hurting others. A recent survey done by the Special Olympics Global Collaborating Center showed that 86% of youth today hear their friends or others at school using the R word. Almost 40% of those youth either participated in the offensive conduct or failed to respond, while only 33% took a stand and told the person that it was wrong to use the R word. It was clear from the survey that most of the youth understood that the use of the R word was intended to demean or bully the person being called retarded **and** that the use of the word was offensive to people in their schools who have disabilities. In Nebraska, we have taken a strong stand in our schools and in our communities against bullying – yet we continue to accept the use of this derogatory term.

As long as mental retardation is an acceptable clinical term for people in Nebraska with intellectual and developmental disabilities, our youth will continue to taunt others by calling

them retards. The word hurts, even if it is not directed at a person with intellectual and developmental disabilities. For too long, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have had to overcome the challenges society has put forth through stereotypes. It is time for a change.

The Nebraska legislature has repeatedly expressed their support for people with developmental disabilities through significant commitments of financial resources. Now you have the opportunity to provide them with a significant benefit that will cost you nothing. By removing the R word from Nebraska law, you will be recognizing the value of people with developmental disabilities and honoring them with the respect and dignity that they are so often deprived of. For these reasons, I encourage you to advance LB343.