



April 2, 2026

Lincoln Arneal
Nebraska Young Adult Citizen Review Panel
Nebraska Children and Families Foundation
215 Centennial Mall South Suite 200
Lincoln, NE 68508

RE: Annual Report and Recommendations

Dear Project Everlast Citizen Review Panel Members,

The Division of Children and Family Services (CFS) would like to express our gratitude to the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) for your hard work over the past year. We have received the 2025 Annual Report and truly appreciate the CRP's dedication and ongoing efforts.

CFS recognizes the vital role of the CRP and highly values the opinions of young people. We have reviewed the following recommendations:

Recommendation #1 - Providing Luggage to Youth in Need

Ensuring that children and youth in Nebraska receive care that is both dignified and developmentally appropriate is a priority shared by CFS. We appreciate the time, personal experience, and data you have contributed to highlighting this issue. We recognize the concerns expressed regarding instances where youth have been provided with garbage bags when transitioning between placements. While many staff do make every effort to secure appropriate luggage, we agree that this should not depend on individual caseworker discretion, and that a more consistent and equitable approach is warranted.

CFS is committed to exploring feasible and sustainable solutions that ensure all youth have access to proper bags during transitions. As part of this commitment, we plan to:

- 1. Assess Current Practices and Inventory:**
Conduct a review across service areas to identify existing resources, availability of luggage, and current gaps in practice.
- 2. Explore Partnerships:**
Re-engage with community organizations, and nonprofits to determine opportunities for collaboration and resource development, while also assessing the viability of reestablishing or strengthening programs that were previously available.
- 3. Review External Models:**
Monitor and review recent legislation and practices implemented in other states to identify promising models that could inform Nebraska's approach.

4. **Evaluate Use of Chafee Funds:**

Examine whether Chafee (Independent Living) funds can be appropriately allocated to support the purchase and distribution of compact, durable bags for use during placement changes.

5. **Develop Consistent Guidance:**

CFS will explore the development of uniform guidance ensuring staff have access to appropriate luggage options and clear procedures for use during transitions.

Recommendation #2 - Addressing Racial Disparities

Our Learning and Development team has been actively engaged in the development of publicly accessible training resources designed to support consistent understanding and application of child safety and well-being practices. This training initiative is structured in two primary components. The first component is an updated mandatory reporter training video, titled *WECARE*. The *WECARE* mandatory reporter video was officially released by CFS on August 27, 2025. The updated content reflects current best practices and emphasizes consistent, objective decision-making by mandatory reporters across all communities. The purpose of this video is to further strengthen mandatory reporter awareness, reinforce statutory reporting responsibilities, and provide foundational education to the public on identifying, preventing, and responding to concerns related to child safety and overall well-being. The second component will feature a self-paced training that will come with a completion certificate.

The assessments CFS currently utilize in conjunction with this training are intentionally designed to focus on safety, risk factors, and indicators of well-being, rather than personal characteristics such as race or ethnicity. Assessment questions are standardized and applied uniformly to ensure fairness, consistency, and equity in evaluation and decision-making. This approach supports the reduction of unintended bias and helps promote equitable outcomes by ensuring that responses are guided by observed safety concerns and documented risk factors, not demographic information. Collectively, these training and assessment tools are intended to support a trauma-informed, equitable framework that prioritizes child safety and well-being while reinforcing accountability, consistency, and professionalism among mandatory reporters and stakeholders across all populations.

Recommendation #3 - Focus on Nutrition for Foster Youth

CFS recognizes that consistent access to nutritious and affordable food is an important factor in supporting the overall health and well-being of children and youth involved in the child welfare system, particularly given the complexities associated with placement changes and varying caregiver resources. CFS appreciates the emphasis on caregiver education, youth engagement, and continuity of nutritional support outlined in this recommendation. The proposed concepts align with broader child-centered and trauma-informed approaches that value caregiver preparedness, youth voice, and coordination among caregivers and case workers.

CFS acknowledges that meal planning, dietary needs, and food preferences can be impacted by transitions and that thoughtful consideration of these factors may contribute to improved stability and outcomes for youth. CFS will review the recommendation and its components within the context of existing training requirements, available resources, statutory authority, and operational considerations. We appreciate the thoughtful analysis and the focus on promoting food security, empowerment, and long-term wellness for foster youth, and we value the opportunity to consider recommendations aimed at strengthening support for children, families, and caregivers across the system.

Recommendation #4 - Combatting Linguistic Neglect in Deaf and Hard of Hearing Youth in Care

CFS acknowledges the critical need to address linguistic access and communication barriers experienced by Deaf and Hard of Hearing (D/HH) youth involved in Nebraska's child welfare system. CFS recognizes that D/HH youth represent a low-incidence population within care, yet experience disproportionate rates of trauma, abuse, and language deprivation. Ensuring meaningful communication, cultural and linguistic competency, and continuity of services remains essential to supporting safety, well-being, and permanency outcomes for these youth. Currently, CFS has one state-supported foster home that is specifically willing and able to provide placement for D/HH youth. In addition, CFS works with 21 agency-supported foster homes across the state that are also willing and capable of

serving D/HH youth. CFS acknowledges the importance of expanding and strengthening this network and continues to collaborate with licensed agencies to support placement capacity for D/HH youth.

CFS currently maintains contracted interpreter services to support communication with D/HH youth and American Sign Language (ASL) using family members. One such contracted provider is Karasch and Associates, which offers certified ASL interpretation services either virtually via approved video platforms or in person when feasible and necessary. All interpreters provided through this contract are certified by the Registry of Interpreters of the Deaf (RID), ensuring professional and qualified communication support.

In instances where Karasch and Associates are unavailable, CFS utilizes its Qualified Contractor Pool, which includes contracted individuals approved to provide ASL interpretation services. At present, this pool includes five qualified interpreters capable of delivering in-person ASL services across various regions of the state. When neither contracted option is available, CFS may utilize an Open Market Service Contract to secure ASL-proficient individuals to assist with communication needs, ensuring that access to interpretation is maintained whenever possible.

Regarding court-related matters, CFS acknowledges that the responsibility for providing ASL interpretation during court proceedings rests with the court system. While CFS contractors are responsible for ensuring that ASL services are provided for all child welfare-related activities, including family support services, case planning meetings, and supervised visitation. CFS contractors must ensure these services are available to families on a consistent basis and may seek reimbursement from CFS for approved costs associated with providing ASL services, in accordance with contract terms and applicable reimbursement policies.

CFS fully understands the barriers faced by D/HH youth and families who communicate primarily through ASL and recognizes the importance of consistency in interpreter services to foster trust, understanding, and emotional safety. While CFS strives to maintain interpreter continuity whenever possible, the Department acknowledges that there are circumstances beyond its direct control. For example, some interpreters may be unavailable or unwilling to provide services in cases involving court participation or concurrent legal proceedings, which can limit consistency despite best efforts. In alignment with this recommendation, CFS continues to emphasize reasonable accommodations, trauma-informed practice, and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). CFS remains committed to working with Deaf and Hard of Hearing youth to ensure they receive appropriate services, individualized support, and care that meets their developmental and age-appropriate needs.

Thank you for your continued partnership. We look forward to collaborating to implement these recommendations.

Sincerely,



Kathleen Stolz

Deputy Director of Children and Family Services
Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services