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Education Committee October 28, 2022
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WALZ: [RECORDER MALFUNCTION] started. We are missing a few of our senators. I know Senator--

SANDERS: Day.

WALZ: --Day, yeah, is not feeling well. Morfeld and Pansing Brooks are busy. I know Senator Linehan has a hearing right now. So anyway, we-- and, and Senator McKinney will be coming in. I'm not sure, Senator, Senator Murman--

SANDERS: Got me.

WALZ: Anyhow, so I apologize that we have a smaller group here today, but everybody's busy. So welcome to the Education Committee public hearing. My name is Lynne Walz from Legislative District 15. I serve as the Chair of the committee. The committee will take up the orders and-- the items in the order on the posted agenda. Today is your-- or today's hearing is for invited, invited testimony only. To better facilitate today's proceeding, I ask that you abide by the following procedures. Please turn off or silence cell phones or other electronic devices. Move to the chairs to the front of the room when you are ready to testify. If you have written materials that you would like distributed to the committee, please hand them to the committee clerk to distribute. We need ten copies for all committee members and staff. If you need additional copies, please ask a page to make copies for you now. When you begin to testify, spell and state your-- or state and spell your name for the record. Please speak directly into the microphone so our transcribers are able to hear your testimony clearly. And finally, please be concise. Testimony will be limited to five minutes. We will be using the light system. Green, you have five minutes remaining; yellow, one minute remaining; and then you wrap up your comments when you see the red light. I haven't done this for a while can you tell? The committee members with us today will introduce themselves beginning at my left.

SANDERS: The one and only. Rita Sanders representing District 45, the Bellevue/Offutt community.

WALZ: Thank you. To my immediate right is legal counsel, Elsa Knight. And to the right end of the table is committee clerk, Noah Boger. I also would like to remind our committee members to speak directly into the microphones and limit side conversations or making noise on personal devices. We are an electronics-equipped committee and

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information is provided electronically as well as in paper form. Therefore, you may see committee members referencing information on their electronic devices. Please be assured that your presence here today and your testimony are very important to us and it is crucial to our state government. And with that, we will open on LR354. Senator McDonnell, welcome.

McDONNELL: Good morning. Thank you. And, and to my two favorite senators in the room, I appreciate you taking the time.

WALZ: Oh--

SANDERS: There's a third.

McDONNELL: Oh, jeez, now it just really--

WALZ: Three.

McDONNELL: --we really got the three-- my three favorite senators in the room. Thank you, Senator McKinney, for attending. I know everyone's busy and, and I appreciate the time. My name is Mike McDonnell, M-i-k-e M-c-D-o-n-n-e-l-l. I represent Legislative District 5 in south Omaha. We are here to hear from subject matter experts on educational experiences and outcomes of youth in foster care. We want to explore the national and best practices, known challenges faced by these youth, current state support systems, disparities in attainment, potential programs and state efforts, and potential, potential changes to support improved educational outcomes for youth in foster care. Unfortunately, for some children, their home is not a safe place. In fact, because of abuse or neglect, these children are removed from their homes and put in foster care. Oftentimes, school-aged kids in foster care move around frequently to different living arrangements and schools. Sadly, all of this movement can really interfere with their education and academic success. Children in foster care frequently change schools, which makes it harder for them to do well academically. They often struggle more than their peers and less likely to graduate from high school or pursue higher education, including when compared to homeless youth. If you-- if we took-- if we take a closer look at the barriers they face, maybe we can help these children succeed academically. Father Flanagan said there was not bad kids. There's bad examples, there's bad mentoring. The subject matter experts behind me are, are struggling with this, and we all should be based on the idea that, you know, the old saying, the children are our future. We're sure not treating them like we want a future. We're not

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treating them like they're human beings at times. It's important.
Thanks for being here today.

WALZ: Thank you, Senator McDonnell, really appreciate you bringing this. First testifier is Dr. Mike Baumgartner. Good morning.

MIKE BAUMGARTNER: Good morning. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman, members of the committee. I'm sure you're tired of seeing me this month.

WALZ: No, never tired of seeing you.

MIKE BAUMGARTNER: This is the third or fourth time that I've been here recently. My name is Mike Baumgartner, M-i-k-e B-a-u-m-g-a-r-t-n-e-r. I'm the executive director of the Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education. About a year ago, leadership of Nebraska's public colleges and universities, the Nebraska Department of Education, and the Coordinating Commission began conversing with you, members of the committee, about the need for a state attainment goal. Those conversations coalesced into LR335, which, as you know, established the goal that 70 percent of Nebraskans aged 25 to 34 will have a certificate, degree, diploma or other postsecondary or industry credential with economic value in the workforce by 2030. The resolution recognized that having a state attainment goal helps us as a state focus on organized strategies related to workforce development and the promotion of diversity and inclusion. It also declared the Legislature's finding that disparities in educational attainment impede individual and collective well-being and prosperity and must be reduced and eliminated. I've appeared before you a couple of times in the last month to talk about strategies and programs that will help us meet the 70 percent goal. I doubt that there's any group of young people in Nebraska who need as much assistance and have as far to go to help us meet that 70 percent goal as our foster youth. As other presenters will tell you this morning, while the great majority of our foster youth report that they want to attend college, few do, and even fewer complete a postsecondary credential. In fact, studies have shown that as few as 10-- 2 percent to maybe a high of 10 percent of foster care alumni attained a bachelor's degree, and perhaps only 15 percent attained any credential. That's not in Nebraska statistics, that's national. But I don't think we have any reason to think it's any different from here. So 15 percent, that is a far cry from, from the 70 percent state goal that we're looking at. That's the kind of disparity in educational attainment that dramatically impedes individual and collective well-being and must be reduced and eliminated. Meeting the challenges of getting our foster youth

graduated from high school, enrolled in postsecondary education, graduated with meaningful college degrees or credentials and into the workforce, hopefully in H3 jobs which pay better, hence H3, involves many school community and campus organizations providing coaching services and financial assistance. Most of those partnerships and services are beyond my expertise and knowledge so I will not speak to them. Other people will today. However, given the long odds of foster youth who are students face and the impact of not completing postsecondary credential with value in the workplace, I would like to raise briefly the issue of student financial aid with you. Federal law declares that students who have been in foster care after age 13 or who are verified as unaccompanied homeless youth are considered independent for financial aid purposes. As independent students, parental income and assets are not collected or used to calculate expected family income. Students with an expected family contribution of zero, which would be nearly all foster youth because they are independent and they don't have-- part of being foster youth is typically not having, having financial means that, that many others have-- means they're eligible for a maximum Pell Grant this year of \$6,895 if they're full-time students. If the student were also to receive the average Nebraska Opportunity Grant, which as I told you last week or two weeks ago was \$1,720, and keep in mind as well that we mentioned that fewer than half of eligible students receive the Nebraska Opportunity Grant because we don't have enough funding, means that even if they get the full Pell Grant and get the average Nebraska Opportunity Grant, they are still a long way from getting full cost of attendance, which includes housing, food, books, transportation, personal items, and childcare if there is a dependent. And I know that Joe and others will talk about that presently for you. As you consider the charge to the committee in LR354, which covers a lot of ground because the educational experiences and outcomes of foster youth cover a lot of ground, I would ask that you keep the financial aid needs of foster youth and postsecondary education top of mind. Getting Nebraska to its 70 percent goal of young adults with a degree or a credential of value is a big lift, but it aligns with the needs of our community and our economy. That's why the Legislature did it. That's why you, as Education Committee, sponsored that resolution. Making sure that foster youth are fully included as part of meeting the attainment goal is a much bigger lift given low levels of attainment, but it's necessary for individual and collective well-being and prosperity, as we say in the attainment goal resolution. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. I conclude my testimony with that.

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WALZ: Thank you so much. Questions from the committee? Senator McKinney.

McKINNEY: Thank you, Senator Walz. Thank you for your testimony. What do you think is needed to address that financial aid issue that you brought up?

MIKE BAUMGARTNER: Well, I, I think that in several states or communities, there are additional scholarship opportunities for foster youth to cover up to the cost of attendance. So when you subtract the Pell Grant and SEOG, Nebraska Opportunity Grant, any other assistance in housing or living expenses or educational vouchers, finding that last dollar to fill that entire need so that students don't have to worry about working or not eating or housing situations, then, then I think that, I think that could have a positive impact there. So I, I think just filling in those last gaps, putting together everything else, and then filling in those gaps could be a, a solution to meeting at least this piece, the financial aid piece.

McKINNEY: Are there any states using state dollars to, to fill that gap?

MIKE BAUMGARTNER: Minnesota has a program that does that. I'm not sure about other states. That's the one that I'm, that I'm aware of and it does exactly as I mentioned. And I believe there are other local communities, if not states-- there are other people, as I mentioned, who, who will probably be able to speak better to that than I am, but Minnesota has, has a really exciting, I think, program to do that.

McKINNEY: All right. Thank you.

WALZ: Thank you. Senator Sanders. I have a question, you may not be able to answer it. Do you know how many eligible youth we would have that would be able to take advantage of some type of gap assistance financing?

MIKE BAUMGARTNER: I'm going to defer to Joe and others. I have been told that there are 375 students enrolled in the state in community colleges or public institutions who would qualify at this point. But they're-- if there are any caveats to that, I'm going to let other people--

WALZ: OK.

MIKE BAUMGARTNER: --speak to that. But that, that was my understanding. And about 100 graduate each year from high school, 100 foster youth. There are many more that don't graduate. But so you're not, not looking at a massive number, but you are looking at students with a lot of needs.

WALZ: All right. Very good. Thank you so much. Thanks for coming today. Our next testifier will be Sarah Helvey from the Child Welfare Program.

SARAH HELVEY: Good morning.

WALZ: How are you?

SARAH HELVEY: Good. How are you?

WALZ: Good.

SARAH HELVEY: Good. My name is Sarah Helvey. It's S-a-r-a-h, last name H-e-l-v-e-y, and I'm a staff attorney and director of the Child Welfare Program at Nebraska Appleseed. We know that the best pathway out of poverty is education. But for young people with foster care and other system experience, barriers can make access to postsecondary education much more difficult. I'll repeat the statistics because I think they're really stark. Nationally, only 54 percent of youth in foster care complete high school by age 18, compared to 87 percent of the general population. And in addition, while the majority of youth in foster care indicate that they want to go to college, young-- less than a third actually enroll in postsecondary education at some level. And less than 2 percent of young people with foster care experience ultimately obtain a bachelor's degree. We must do better for these young people who are the future of our state. To address these barriers, these barriers, support-- financial and otherwise-- is needed. This includes helping to make up the difference in the actual cost of college. So not just tuition, but also fees, books, and living expenses. Other states have recognized this need and have created programs to address challenges to educational success for youth in foster care. And so I'll mention the one that the previous testifier said, a newly established program in Minnesota provides grants to young people who are in foster care at age 13 or older through age 27 to cover tuition, room and board, and other expenses not covered by scholarships or traditional state and federal aid. So as the previous testifier mentioned, many of these young people are eligible for Pell Grants and other sources. So there is that support that exists. It

just makes up that additional cost of the actual attendance, which we see is-- to be such a barrier for so many young people. We do hope that Nebraska will consider a similar program to help bridge the gap and improve educational attainment and ultimately improve long-term outcomes for young people with foster care experience. These are young people who have already overcome significant odds, and their success is a key investment for us in Nebraska. Thank you for your time and attention to this important issue and for all your dedication to youth in Nebraska.

WALZ: Thank you. Senator McKinney.

McKINNEY: Thank you. And thank you for your testimony. Now that the state has taken over child welfare and not privatized by Saint Francis, do you think the gap will increase or decrease?

SARAH HELVEY: I'm hopeful it will decrease, but we'll have to see.

McKINNEY: What, what other things more upstream before they even start planning for college do you think we need to put in place in our education system to address this gap because if the state is technically in charge of the well-being of these kids, what do we need to do to address these issues in foster care and from education side?

SARAH HELVEY: Yeah, well, I mean, they're-- we see differences in educational outcomes for in K-12 education and obviously even earlier than that, and so there's a lot of work that needs to be done in that area. A lot of that comes down to the mobility of young people when they're moving from placement to placement that creates an educational disruption. And communication between schools is critical to help make that more seamless. Also, making sure young people are accessing the school supports that they need. There's a significant population of young people in foster care that have special education needs, in part due to trauma and behavioral health. And so we need to make sure that those issues are being addressed earlier for young people and then additional supports for young people as they're aging out of foster care, which I think gets to this interim study in that sort of 15 to 26 age range where they're making that transition into adulthood can be a really critical period in terms of their long-term outcomes.

McKINNEY: All right. Thank you.

SARAH HELVEY: Thank you.

WALZ: You asked my questions. Thank you.

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McKINNEY: [INAUDIBLE]

WALZ: No, that's good. You asked them way better than I did probably. Any other questions? Thank you so much, we appreciate it.

SARAH HELVEY: Thank you, everyone.

WALZ: Tatiana, if that's how I say it?

TATIANA SAILLANT: What did you say?

WALZ: Tatiana. Tatiana.

TATIANA SAILLANT: Yeah, that's about right.

WALZ: Good to have you here.

TATIANA SAILLANT: Hi, everyone. My name's Tatiana. I'm supposed to spell it for you.

WALZ: Yes, please.

TATIANA SAILLANT: T-a-t-i-a-n-a, Saillant, S-a-i-l-l-a-n-t. I'm here testifying among all the other foster care children amongst Nebraska. I'm originally from Miami, Florida. I was moved to Nebraska at the age of nine. I've been here ever since, so technically I am considered a Nebraska local. I beat statistics while graduating high school and succeeding in middle school and elementary. I continued on to college at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Unfortunately, I did not graduate, considering I had other responsibilities to worry about besides life well-being. I also would like to say there's a lot of things that include just besides books, tuition, room and board, the mental stability part is probably the biggest issue considering we have to worry about all of our past traumas, go through therapy, and experience other situations that we experience while being in college. Considering other students have family members and support systems behind their back, we do not have that, considering our foster parents and foster homes accepted us in more so than being low-income themselves. So in-- I'm a first-generation college student, so none of my parents understood or family members understood how college worked. They expected me to be able to go to college, considering they thought I had a full ride. Everywhere I went, I had a choice and that was a lie. Being in Florida, I also myself researched the Florida policy of foster care kids. They do receive way more support than Nebraska considering it's a hot mess down there. But I would also say that a

lot more foster youth precedes up there. And if they don't, they turn into scammers. And a lot of the bad situations, a lot of people will come up to me saying that I was a good example of a foster youth when generally speaking, I don't think of myself as a good example, considering I have not graduated college yet and I'm still struggling to find support myself mentally, physically, financially. I am just now growing into an adult at the age of 24 and there's still plenty more things that I need to accomplish and I think that I can accomplish if I had the financial support behind my back.

WALZ: Good. Thank you.

TATIANA SAILLANT: Of course.

WALZ: Questions? I have a question. You talked a little bit about mental stability and how that's a large part of the success of a student. Is there-- do you have any ideas or can you think of something that would have really, just something that would have really helped you in that area that--

TATIANA SAILLANT: When it comes to mental stability, I think something that really would have helped me is more focusing on financial literacy, considering I did grow up in a low-income home foster care-- in foster care. So I didn't really know nothing about financial literacy, whereas other families have already situated themselves in life and are able to teach their children financial literacy and financial literacy is a very big thing throughout life. And without that being said, I had to figure it out on my own, and I'm still figuring it out to this day.

WALZ: Wow. Good. I appreciate that feedback. Thank you. Senator McKinney.

McKINNEY: Thank you. And thank you for your testimony. What things were in place when you were transitioning from graduating high school to going to school-- to going to UNL? What, what things were there to help you and what things do you wish that were there to kind of guide you along your way?

TATIANA SAILLANT: So when it came to help, I already had multiple Nebraska programs reach out to me. Considering that I was in guardianship when I moved here at the age of nine and they put me in guardianship at 13, they disqualified me from any foster care help because I was in guardianship. I wish there was a lot more help when

it came to understanding that, hey, I'm not going to be able to pay for all of this, but we'll pay for a certain percentage. They made it seem as if everything was already paid for. So in my head I'm going into college thinking I have nothing to worry about when really I'm going to be already working 40 hours as a full-time student.

McKINNEY: So because you-- and could you clarify guardianship-- did you come from Florida to be with another family member?

TATIANA SAILLANT: So I was actually adopted in Florida.

McKINNEY: OK.

TATIANA SAILLANT: And my family member actually was on the run that adopted me, came and dropped me off at the Emmanuel Hospital during the whole drop your child off thing. I forgot what year that was. I was still a child, but-- and then I got put back in foster care. And then after being in foster care and being on good, you would say good terms with my foster family. Unlike other youth, they don't get the good terms. I was put back in guardianship because it was like a less foster care child taken out of the system they didn't have to worry about.

McKINNEY: So would you say it probably in your case when you were transitioning to college, it would have been better to stay technically in foster care than guardianship because they cut you off?

TATIANA SAILLANT: Yes, they cut me off everything. I turned 18 and I got a letter in the mail. I had no health insurance. I had no type of, no type of ability to get any type of mental health. Considering being a foster care child, you definitely need therapy. So I had none of that. I, as a child-- I as a teen, was just happy to be participating in college myself because it's what everyone dreams of. I wanted the college life. I wanted the sorority life. I wanted all of that. And until I got to college, I understood I was not able to even reach any of that.

McKINNEY: And, and thank you again. I, I know it's like-- it's a tough topic, but I appreciate your comments. Thank you.

TATIANA SAILLANT: Of course.

WALZ: Any other questions?

SANDERS: Quick question.

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WALZ: Yeah.

SANDERS: Thank you for your testimony. Before you turned 18, was there a letter prior to that that said you would get this letter, like at age of 16 to prepare you or to prepare your foster parents?

TATIANA SAILLANT: So I did not receive any letter. And my mom was very pretty much open about everything the government sent when it came to assistance or any type of notifications. I didn't-- they might have sent something online, but we did not under-- we did not understand how to log into those things. But it was a week after I turned 18, I did receive that letter. So I myself more focused on how would I be able to get this insurance to get the medicine that I needed so that I can more focus on college? And it did-- it was a bombshell, but as a foster kid, you learn to be-- you learn to adapt to any situation. So for other students, other kids, it might have been a little bit harder. But for me, I've learned to adapt. So I did what I needed to do.

SANDERS: Thank you.

TATIANA SAILLANT: Of course.

WALZ: I just have one more question. So-- thank you for asking that. How much time from the time you got the letter, did you have to prepare?

TATIANA SAILLANT: None.

WALZ: Like you get the letter and that's--

TATIANA SAILLANT: I--

WALZ: --it's that day or how much time do you have to--

TATIANA SAILLANT: I didn't really have no time to prepare. I didn't consider it as-- once again, I adapted. I was like, I would just have to hold on to those until I'm able to afford it myself.

WALZ: All right. Thank you so much for your--

TATIANA SAILLANT: Of course.

WALZ: --testimony, we really appreciate it.

TATIANA SAILLANT: Thank you, guys.

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WALZ: Thanks. Chloe McShannon. Hi, Chloe.

CHLOE McSHANNON: Good morning. My name is Chloe McShannon, C-h-l-o-e M-c-S-h-a-n-n-o-n. I am also here today speaking on behalf of Nebraska foster youth. Tatiana and I had kind of similar but also different experiences. I was a state ward until I was 19. So while she kind of got, you know, cut off from those resources, I was able to receive a number of resources after I aged out of the system. But I will say, as she did, being a college student, transitioning into being a young adult without familial support and without the obvious financial support that comes with having familial support, it's extremely difficult. And as she mentioned, it takes a toll on your mental health when you can't talk to mom or dad or even, you know, grandma and say, hey, I'm struggling. You know, so I truly believe that had I had this opportunity at 19 years old when I was going into college and, you know, starting my adventure, I think I, I would be in a very different place right now. I currently actually had to drop out of the classes that I signed up for this term because I simply could not afford to not be at work. Unfortunately, that's just-- that's, that's just what it is for me right now. Because while I do have financial help for tuition and for my books, I-- the, the living expenses is really what gets us foster youth when we don't have that familial and financial support. As Tatiana had mentioned before, we do leave foster care with the idea in our minds that everything is paid for. And I did actually right away, I signed up for classes at Doane because I had always wanted to go there. And I didn't know exactly how it worked so I emailed that to my caseworker and she, she had to let me know, Chloe, we don't pay for that. I'm not actually sure how you would get it paid for unless you're paying for it. So I did have to drop out of those. And like mentioned before, that affected my mental health. I had no idea how I would get that paid for. I didn't know what the FAFSA was. I didn't know what the Pell Grant was, and I didn't know what resources I had available to me. And at the time, I didn't have anybody letting me know what I did have. Thankfully, like I said, because I was a state ward until I was 19 and I never achieved guardianship, I did have access to all the other resources that unfortunately my co-speaker didn't not have. For example, I have multiple scholarships that are available to me because I was a foster youth through Central Plains. I have received the Nebraska Opportunity in the past. I will say that as of right now, I am on financial aid suspension and that is because for the past few terms that I've been at school, I've had to prioritize my living expenses over my classes. But I will say I'm quite a good student when I can focus on class. It

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becomes hard falling behind when you have to put your main focus on work. And I really hope that this is a step in the right direction for incoming foster youth and, you know, foster youth becoming young adults. And just real quick, as I wrap up, I wanted to quote something that Tatiana had actually said in our Zoom meeting, which was that money is not everything, but in this situation it absolutely is. And for these kids, it absolutely is.

WALZ: Thank you so much.

CHLOE McSHANNON: Thank you.

WALZ: Thank you. Questions from the committee? I have one while--

CHLOE McSHANNON: Yes.

WALZ: --Senator McKinney is thinking. You mentioned that you were under the-- it was your understanding that everything would be paid for.

CHLOE McSHANNON: Right.

WALZ: How-- can you tell me a little bit about that, like--

CHLOE McSHANNON: About how I came to that--

WALZ: Right.

CHLOE McSHANNON: --conclusion? Yes. So-- and I think that that also has a little bit to do with misunderstandings, possibly with our caseworkers, because when they're speaking-- when I was being spoken to about it, she did also have the idea that, you know, you have, you have it paid for, you're good, your books and your tuition. And she wasn't completely wrong, but none of us had any idea of how to actually get that help, you know? You know, like fill out the FAFSA. She didn't understand that that's what I needed to do. So I didn't understand that that's what I needed to do.

WALZ: OK. Good information. Thank you.

CHLOE McSHANNON: Yeah.

WALZ: Any other questions? We really, really appreciate you coming today.

CHLOE McSHANNON: Of course. Thank you so much for having me.

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WALZ: Thank you. Joe DiCostanzo.

JOE DICOSTANZO: Hello.

WALZ: Hello.

JOE DICOSTANZO: Thank you for having me. My name is Joe DiCostanzo, spelled J-o-e D-i-C-o-s-t-a-n-z-o, and I'm the vice president of education at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. My interest in seeing former foster youth succeed is twofold. One is personal, as I grew up in a household that took foster youth in and as a public school teacher and administrator for over ten years, I've had the opportunity to hear the stories of and work to support youth in care. I see the faces behind these numbers as you have seen today, too, wonderful people. And number two, I see this is directly related to the workforce development, an issue that I know is on the minds of business owners, educators, and state departments. Nebraska has identified a goal of 70 percent credential rate for the Nebraska workforce, as Mike has-- had mentioned. And this population can certainly contribute to our collective workforce solutions. When it comes to opportunity and resources to pursue-- pursue postsecondary education, we can do more to support former foster youth. Yes, many former foster youth receive the Pell and Nebraska does provide money through Nebraska Promise to fill tuition gaps. Many people think and have the perception that while they were state wards, they have it all covered, as Chole had mentioned. That is not the reality. The U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard website shows, shows us there is still financial gaps to be filled. The site calculates the total cost of attendance by identifying costs that include tuition, living expenses, books, supplies, and fees minus the average grants and scholarship for federal financial aid recipients. Even for families who make between zero and \$30,000 a year, the lowest bracket identified, young people still need to try to come up with anywhere between \$3,300 and \$14,000 per year to attend a public postsecondary institution in our state. I've included a chart in my testimony here to provide numbers from the website for each public institution listed. Second, this is a group of young people who have overcome great obstacles and have met all the requirements to be in good standing for acceptance at the institution they wish to attend, a sign that their ability to be a successful participant in Nebraska's workforce. Considering the numbers, former foster youth who are seeking to attend college have already beaten the odds and shown the perseverance necessary to succeed in school and in the workforce. According to the Nebraska Department of Education, their website using

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2020 figures as that was the most recently available that I could find. In 2020, homeless youth graduated high school in four years at a 63 percent rate. By comparison, foster youth in 2020 graduated at a 55 percent rate. In other words, when it comes to graduating high school in four years in Nebraska, you're better off being homeless than you are in the foster care system. We're talking about supporting students who have done what we've asked against so many obstacles. The resilience and determination that young people show in completing high school and seeking more education to provide a better life for themselves are the same qualities that employers look for: problem solving, focus, and resourcefulness to find a way to get the job done, as our two former foster youth presenters have spoken to. What we need to do is provide the financial resources to match the resourcefulness of these young people. We do know that money doesn't solve all problems. As you consider ways to support financially, I want to provide some context as to nonfinancial supports that are available to help former foster youth as they pursue postsecondary opportunities. Helping provide more financial support will only further support the efforts already taking place. What I'm going to mention is definitely not a complete list. On a national level, Congressman Bacon, who is the cochair of the Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth, has co-introduced with Congressman Kildee of Michigan, a Democrat, bipartisan support here on this, the Fostering Postsecondary for Foster and Homeless Youth Act. According to Congressman Kildee's press release, this act would create a recognition program through the U.S. Department of Education to identify and highlight colleges and universities with tailored campus supports to foster and homeless youth. By designating their higher education institutions as foster and homeless youth friendly and profiling them on the website, this program will recognize institutions for their commitment to students and help these students navigate the college going process. It would also create a national center for fostering postsecondary success for foster and homeless youth. This would provide technical assistance to postsecondary institutions as they create and maintain campus-based supports and disseminate best practices across the country. On a state level, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation partners with Central Plains Center for Services, which provides evidence-based one-on-one coaching model to support former foster youth aged 18 to 26 as they transition to adulthood and independence. Department of Health and Human Services also has Bridge to Independence, also known as B2I. These are voluntary programs that support former foster youth as they transition. At the school level, UNO has set up an Office of Hardship and Resiliency Support to help connect former foster youth to services

on campus for academic and nonacademic needs, which was just established here within the past year. And UNL has a Navigators Program. It's newly developed this fall to help connect these former youth-- former foster youth to Central Plains. As you can see, Nebraska has some work to do in supporting former foster youth as they transition out of the system. We are very thankful for the opportunity to talk with you today and look forward to discussing ways to support this population moving forward. Thank you so much for your time and I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.

WALZ: Questions from the committee? Senator McKinney.

McKINNEY: Thank you. What do you think is the, the need as far as a number to address this issue? Because it has been highlighted. We do have-- there are programs that are supposed to help navigate youth that are aging out of foster care or in foster care to be successful in life. But for whatever reason, it's not the greatest because if you're better off being homeless than in foster care, that should tell you everything that we need to do about foster care in the state, because that shouldn't be. So what do you think is the number to address it from the, the part of making sure the youth have resources throughout foster care and after as they, you know, become adults? But also what are the resources that are needed from the system side to make these agencies or institutions better and work for the kids and families?

JOE DICOSTANZO: Yeah. So thank you so much for your question and I'll do my best to answer it. And if I don't, please ask for some clarification. You know, we've kind of in general kind of looking at some of these numbers if you're taking an average from a financial standpoint, you know, you're looking at anywhere between \$7,000 and \$10,000 per year per student. You know, ETV eligible, so Central Plains currently works with 375 youth. As Mike had mentioned, about 100 graduate from high school every year. So you can take that times, you know, whatever, whatever it's going to be in whatever age range you're talking about there. Generally speaking, we've kind of talked about if we're going to take that 400-- excuse me, 375 currently working with Central Plains, which we know is not the whole number of eligible. But if we're going to go with that, you know, you're looking at \$4 million a year if you're going to give about \$10,000 a year. Now, there is certainly a human capacity side that, that, you know, we might want to think about in training up. Most current knowledge and best practices in working with foster youth, school social workers and, and case managers for DHHS are for the most part really great,

hardworking people that do the best that they can. A lot of turnover. You know, I've talked to, you know, when I was an administrator, can you tell me who your case manager is? I don't know, I've had four in the last year. Right? So that transition is tough as well for, for our youth in care as they're seeking to navigate this. On the FAFSA, and somebody correct me if I'm wrong here, too, there is a, there is an opportunity to mark whether you were a former foster youth, it's worded a little bit differently. And so we could probably pull some of those numbers for the state of Nebraska based on the application. Now, not everybody fills out the FAFSA on time as well. So which leads me to the additional-- so I'm sorry to go on here--

WALZ: No, it's fine.

JOE DICOSTANZO: --there's an identification hurdle as well. And I'm-- I-- you know, I'm not the person to say, well, everybody in care needs to be on this database so we can "da, da, da, da", that's, that's kind of not what I'm saying here. But as we're seeking to connect with former foster youth, it's really hard to, you know, identify from the schools sharing information, right, self-identification. Not oftentimes people want to lead with that. Hi, I'm Joe. I'm a-- you know, so there are certain identification challenges that I think once that identification challenge is-- that are smoothed out, campuses are ready to support in certain ways. And there is legislation that, you know, is pending at the national level to help do that as well. So complicated answer to probably a much more straightforward question, but that's what I would suggest is, is, is needed.

McKINNEY: OK. Thank you.

JOE DICOSTANZO: Absolutely.

WALZ: Are there any other states that you would advise us to look at as far as foster care and some of the things that they're doing?

JOE DICOSTANZO: Yeah, I think that, you know, as previous ment-- as previously mentioned, Minnesota, it's very new. So I don't know what these outcomes are going to be for the money that they're spending. So I don't want to make any grand predictions about a tenfold ROI or anything like that. But that, that is certainly from what I can see in the legislation, they're getting full cost of attendance for any brick and mortar in the state, public and private. I've just produced public institution figures here. A variety of states, Texas, Mississippi, there's different ways to approach this in terms of tuition waivers.

But then again, that money still got to come from somewhere. So I don't think anybody has it figured out yet. If, if, if somebody did, I hope we would all hear about it. But I think we're all working on to better this situation for young people. Michigan is the one then that I would also kind of point to. They have several campuses that are really doing some great things around supporting these young people as they are on campus. I don't know what their financial aid situation and supports looks like, however.

WALZ: OK. All right. Any other questions?

SANDERS: I do.

WALZ: Yeah.

SANDERS: Thank you. In, in your statement here about the graduating rate for high school students that are homeless, 63 percent and those that are in foster care, 55 percent, so there's an 8 percent difference. What's the difference? Why, why are the homeless graduating at an 8 percent better rate than the--

JOE DICOSTANZO: Yeah.

SANDERS: --the foster?

JOE DICOSTANZO: Good question. And I've been thinking about it and I'm not really sure, but I have some hypotheses here is, at least in my personal experience, so it's anecdotal. Young people in foster care as they move from house to house, as has kind of been mentioned before, that can certainly disrupt their educational experience. They may go from school A to school B because it's closer, it's more convenient. Maybe they're moving from one part of the state to the next for whatever that individual circumstance calls for. So that transition is very difficult, not only for the schools in terms of getting academic records from the previous school, there seems to be a lag. There's actually a, a committee hearing this afternoon to address some of that data sharing with HHS, NDE, and others. I don't know how that's going to turn out or look so there's that data sharing piece and the instability. So my guess would be if you're homeless, you're still with your family from place to place. It could be a motel, could be a shelter. So there's a family stability. We know kids spend only 20 percent of their waking hours in school. There's that other 80 percent. Right? So that's kind of where that family support comes in also. So if there's a stability in that 80 percent, it makes that 20

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percent a bit easier. Even though their shelter might not be stable, the unit, the family unit tends to be more intact.

SANDERS: Thank you.

WALZ: Any other questions? Thank you so much--

JOE DICOSTANZO: OK.

WALZ: --for coming today, Joe, we appreciate it.

JOE DICOSTANZO: Thank you so much for the opportunity. Thank you, Senator McDonnell.

WALZ: I think that's it, you're up, if you'd like to close.

McDONNELL: I would. Thank you. Thank you to everyone that's here today to, to discuss this important issue. I think there's a, there's a point-- and I think 99 percent of, of, of people in the state of Nebraska want to see kids do their best. They want to see them, you know, develop into the best version of themselves. And I think sometimes government needs to plow the way and sometimes government needs to get out of the way. But there's also a certain point you want to talk about helping people and giving them a hand up or you just want to beat them down. At a certain point people get beat down and if it starts as a child-- and, and let's just get into the-- I mentioned 99 percent, let's just get in the 1 percent that really don't care. Let's talk about saving money because the investment we make now, we want to talk about recidivism, we want to talk about reducing that population, that prison population, this is where it starts. Because we're going to pay either now and invest in them to be the best version of themselves or we are going to house them. And that's what's going to happen and it's been going on for years. So we have an opportunity here. We have an opportunity as a person that serves on Appropriations to save money. Invest it now, let them be the best version of themselves or we're going to pay later. And I think that's how we have to look at it at times. Again, I know people want to help and I think they want to take their-- every tax dollar is important and they want to see their tax dollars helping people. But at the same time, if we can do this and we frame it and make sure that our fellow senators understand, not only are we helping those children and raising some of these unfair hurdles that have been put in front of them, but we're also going to save money in the long term. So thank

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you for your time. I'm here to try to answer any of your questions, but these are the subject matter experts behind me.

WALZ: Thank you, Senator McDonnell.

McDONNELL: Yeah.

WALZ: Any questions? Senator McKinney.

McKINNEY: I don't know if it's a question. It's probably just more so a statement of, of agreeance with you. Because I, I would agree with you. If you-- if anyone would go through the state institutions that we're housing people that are incarcerated, a lot of those individuals, a good percentage went through the child, child welfare system. And that speaks to the failures of the child welfare system. And I agree with you, it's something we should address and try to find a way to make sure these two students in the back can finish college and, you know, be successful adults.

McDONNELL: And look at the hurdles they've overcome and how successful they are right at this point. Look at how well they did today. But you talk to people that are serving time, and I've had family members serve time that made stupid mistakes, but I tell you, most of the time, you're going to find out, as Senator McKinney said, they were beat down young and they were beat down consistently. And as soon as you do that to a human being, sooner or later they're going to fight back and they're going to snap. And I don't, I don't ever want to make an excuse for someone committing a crime, but I think there's reasons. I don't think there is excuses, but there's definitely reasons. And if you put a person in that situation long enough, they're going to turn to crime. Again, not making excuses, but I believe there is reasons for people committing a crime.

WALZ: Any other questions? Thank you so much.

McDONNELL: Thank you so much for being here. Again, my favorite three senators in the room at this moment in time, thank you.

WALZ: Thank you for bringing this. And that ends our hearing for today.