

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Health and Human Services Committee April 29, 2025

HARDIN: Welcome to the Health and Human Services Committee. I'm Senator Brian Hardin, representing Legislative District 48, and I serve as chair of the committee. The committee will take up the bills today in the order posted, and since we have no bills today, we're not going to post any of those. This public hearing today is your opportunity to be a part of the legislative process and to express your position on the proposed legislation before us. We're actually going to read two testimonies today and-- for some folks from the Stem Cell Research Advisory Committee, and then we'll have a hearing right after that, particularly for Shannon. So-- but if you're here to testify, there's a green sheet over here on the table and be sure to print clearly, fill it out completely. Please move the front, be ready to go, and hand that testifier sheet to the page. If you do not wish to test-- testify, but would like to indicate your position, there are yellow sign-in sheets as well. These sheets will be included as an exhibit in the official hearing record. When you come up to testify, please speak clearly into the microphone and tell us your name, spell your first and last name to ensure we get the record accurately. We'll begin with, like I said, the two read statements so if you can put up with me reading that would be great and then we'll, we'll move on. We are going to just introduce the committee to you. Senator Hansen is over here and we'll work our way around.

HANSEN: Senator Ben Hansen, District 16, which is Washington, Burt, Cuming, and parts of Stanton County.

RIEPE: Merv Riepe, District 12, which is Omaha and the fun town of Ralston.

FREDRICKSON: John Fredrickson, District 20, which is in central west Omaha.

MEYER: Glen Meyer, District 17, northeast Nebraska, Dakota, Thurston, Wayne, and southern part of Dixon County.

QUICK: Dan Quick, District 35, Grand Island.

BALLARD: Beau Ballard, District 21, in Lancaster County.

HARDIN: Props and charts and other visual aids can't be used simply because we can't transcribe those. Silence or turn off your cell phones. Verbal outbursts or applause are not permitted even if you really like what someone just said. OK? And so we're going to get rolling here in just a moment. Let me introduce to you Barb Dorn. She

keeps us working properly as well as Bryson Bartels. So thanks, guys, for being here. We also have Kathryn. How are you?

KATHRYN SINGH: Fine, how are you?

HARDIN: Well, dandy. So with that, let me begin with our first written testimony, and I genuinely hope that this person will forgive me if I pronounce the name incorrectly. To the Nebraska HHS Committee, I, Dr. Alysson Muotri, am honored to express my strong willingness to continue serving on the Nebraska Stem Cell Agency. With extensive experience in stem cell research and regenerative medicine, I'm confident that my background will allow me to make valuable contributions to the agency's mission of advancing scientific innovation and improving human health. My expertise lies primarily in the use of stem cells for understanding neurological diseases, including autism and neurodegenerative disorders. Over the years, I have established myself as a leader in the field with a particular focus on neural stem cell biology, disease modeling, and the development of potential therapeutic strategies using stem cells and gene therapy. I have published extensively in high-impact journals and have been invited to speak at numerous international conferences on stem cell biology and regenerative medicine. In addition to my research, I have a deep understanding of the importance of funding in fostering scientific advancements. I've had the privilege of serving as a peer reviewer for numerous national and international granting agencies, including the National Institutes of Health, the European Commission, and the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research, among others. This experience has honed my ability to critically evaluate research proposals and assess their potential impact on the scientific community and public health. I'm accustomed to reviewing a diverse range of stem cell research proposals and understanding both their scientific rigor and the practical considerations needed for successful translation into therapeutic applications. Having worked with many interdisciplinary teams, I recognize the importance of collaboration between scientists, clinicians, and policymakers in translating cutting-edge research into real-world solutions. I believe my broad experience across these areas, coupled with my passion for stem cell-based innovation, will enable me to make meaningful contributions to the Nebraska Stem Cell Agency. I'm committed to supporting the Agency's mission of fostering scientific excellence, promoting innovative research, and ensuring that Nebraska remains at the forefront of stem cell research and regenerative medicine. My deep dedication to advancing this field aligns with the NSCA's goals and I look forward to the opportunity to collaborate with other experts to drive forward important scientific

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discoveries that have the potential to transform health care for the better. Sincerely, Alysson R. Muotri, PhD. A second testimony comes in written form from Rui Yi, PhD. To the honorable members of the Nebraska HHS Committee, I am honored to submit this written testimony in support of my continued service on Nebraska's Stem Cell Agency. Since my initial appointment in 2017, I have been privileged to contribute to the committee's grant review and funding recommendations, applying my expertise in epithelial stem cell biology to advance responsible and impactful stem cell research in the state of Nebraska. My primary area of scientific focus is hair follicle stem cell research, a field in which I have conducted both basic and translational studies for over a decade. In my laboratory, we have elucidated the molecular mechanisms that regulate stem cell maintenance, activation, differentiation, and niche interactions during hair follicle development, regeneration, and aging. These investigations have shed light on fundamental mechanisms of tissue homeostasis and rate regeneration. I've served as senior author on multiple high-impact studies that describe novel mechanisms for epithelial stem cell maintenance, activation, and aging. In addition to my laboratory research, I've been deeply engaged in the peer review process for federally funded science and for the scientific literature. I have served as a standing and ad hoc members of many NIH study sections, including DEV2 and ACTS, among many others. In these roles, I have evaluated many grant applications, assessing experimental design, scientific merit, and ethical considerations in stem cell research. My service as a reviewer for top-tier journals such as Nature, Science, and Cell has further reinforced my commitment to rigorous scientific standards and to fostering innovation within our research community. Throughout my tenure on this committee, I have reviewed each grant application, provided recommendation for funding decisions, and provided feedback to investigators from leading research institutions from the state of Nebraska. I remain eager to continue serving alongside my distinguished colleagues, contributing my scientific expertise, grant reviewing experience, and dedication to the responsible stewardship of stem cell research. Together, I'm confident we can provide scientific advances in this vital area of biomedical innovation and ensure that the proposed studies foster safe, ethical, and transformative advances in human health. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to the opportunity to further contribute to the Nebraska Stem Cell Agency. With best regards, Rui Yi, PhD, Paul E. Steiner, Research Professor. Also, I believe we're not just Memorex, we have live people here today. And so Shannon Grotrian.

SHANNON GROTRIAN: Yes.

HARDIN: Welcome.

SHANNON GROTRIAN: Thank you.

HARDIN: Would you mind grabbing your mic and kind of swinging it towards you?

SHANNON GROTRIAN: Sure. How's that? Good?

HARDIN: Great.

SHANNON GROTRIAN: OK. All right. Good afternoon, Chairman Hardin and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Shannon Grotrian, S-h-a-n-n-o-n G-r-o-t-r-i-a-n, and I'm the Director of the Office of Economic Assistance for the Department of Health and Human Services. Today's hearing is required by the federal Community Services Block Grant or CSBG Act as part of the department state plan development process. Currently, the department is developing the state plan for federal fiscal year 2027 and 2028, which is due September 1, 2026. A requisite public hearing will be held, held prior to submission. The purpose of the Community Services Block Grant is to provide assistance to states and local communities working through a network of Community Action Agencies and other neighborhood-based organizations for the reduction of poverty, the revitalization of low-income communities, and the empowerment of low-income families and individuals to become fully self-sufficient. In Nebraska, the nine Community Action Agencies are the eligible entities to which CSBG funds are distributed by the department using a population-based formula. Attached to my testimony, you will find a map indicating these nine service areas. CSBG grant oversight is layered. The Community Action Agencies are accountable for their plans, results, and efforts to adapt to the needs of the people they serve. DHHS is responsible for monitoring and providing oversight to the Community Action Agencies to ensure compliance with federal and state laws as well as organizational standards. The Community Action Agencies conduct an in-depth community-needs assessment at least once every 3 years, which they and their tripartite boards use to develop programs, activities, services, and partnerships. Each board is comprised of at least one-third low-income representatives, one-third elected officials or designees, and the remainder of the private sector representatives reside in the Community Action Agency's service area. CSBG funding provides a range of services and activities to assist the needs of low-income individuals. While each, each Community Action

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Agency is diverse and offers a variety of services based on their communities' needs, several programs are similar across the state, including Head Start, Early Head Start, and adult education programs, housing services, child care, and homeless assistance. Emergency assistance is also a key program area for Community Action Agencies. These services provide rental assistance, utility deposits, and payment of past due bills with a shutoff notice, food, transportation, alcohol and drug counseling, mental health services, food pantries, and the commodity supplemental food program. Community Action Agencies collaborate with state entities such as the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy to provide low-income weatherization programs, and DHHS's Division of Public Health to support efforts such as Women, Infant, and Children's Program, or WIC, maternal and child health home visiting, and immunization programs. They also work with local organizations to operate programs such as senior centers, home-delivered meals, transportation, and youth mentoring. Nebraska received a total of \$5.3 million in CSBG funding for federal fiscal year '24. During this timeframe, Community Action Agencies provided services to more than 32,000 low-income individuals from more than 16,500 families facing various barriers to self-sufficiency. More than 11,000 of these individuals were children, and more than 6,500 were senior citizens. 84% of the families served were at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty level. Thank you for your time. I'd be happy to answer any questions related to this hearing.

HARDIN: Thank you.

SHANNON GROTRIAN: You're welcome.

HARDIN: Questions? Senator Hansen.

HANSEN: Thank you, Chair. So I don't know, you can get about \$5.3 million from the state.

SHANNON GROTRIAN: From federal.

HANSEN: OK, I guess, I was just making sure.

SHANNON GROTRIAN: Yep.

HANSEN: Oh, Nebraska received--

SHANNON GROTRIAN: Yes.

HANSEN: --they just sent it wrong.

SHANNON GROTRIAN: Yes.

HANSEN: I'm, like, making sure I wasn't missing something. And so what's your crystal ball look like? This is a question we've asked a lot of people.

SHANNON GROTRIAN: Yeah.

HANSEN: So, so we need to determine what we need to do.

SHANNON GROTRIAN: I-- yeah, we don't-- I don't have a crystal ball, I wish I did, but we haven't-- in particular to this program, we have not received anything from our federal agencies as to any change or discontinuation of funding at this point.

HANSEN: Nothing official, yet?

SHANNON GROTRIAN: Nothing official or unofficial.

HANSEN: OK. Just whispers in the corners. OK. All right. Just wondered. OK. Thank you.

SHANNON GROTRIAN: Yeah.

HARDIN: Other questions? Is there a way of looking past of looking past whatever we don't know, what are the challenges, beyond, gee, do we have any money? What do you see going on thematically across these nine areas?

SHANNON GROTRIAN: Well, I think each service area is unique and each Community Action Agencies would likely have different challenges, I would say. I think there is-- ENCAP is here, they can probably speak specifically to some of those things for their service area.

HARDIN: OK. All right. Other questions? Thank you.

SHANNON GROTRIAN: All right. Thank you.

HARDIN: Is there anyone here who would be a proponent?

TINA ROCKENBACH: Why, yes.

HARDIN: Why, yes. Welcome.

TINA ROCKENBACH: Thank you. Good afternoon, Senator Hardin, members of the HHS Committee. My name is Tina Rockenbach, T-i-n-a R-o-c-k-e-n-b-a-c-h. I'm the Executive Director for Community Action

of Nebraska. We are the statewide member association representing all 9 of Nebraska's Community Action Agencies serving all 93 counties. Community Action is proud of our proven ability to provide innovative solutions to do our job effectively and efficiently. The Community Services Block Grant, or CSBG, has served as the founding legislation and federal source that creates the Community Action Network nationwide. Our network has successfully implemented this funding for over 60 years, our 9 agencies provide approximately 1,500 jobs annually and help-- who help clients with various situations including, but not limited to, parental support, early childhood education and interventions, preventing homelessness, senior wellness and outreach, financial literacy, weatherization improvements on homes, and much more; all with the result to help clients and their families move upward in their economic autonomy. While CSBG is not the only funding stream for our agencies, it is the core funding that all of our reporting and accountability is governed under. The structure allows our network to leverage additional federal, state, and private grant funds to create new programs as needed. Every agency completes a community needs assessment every 2 to 3 years. Those results are the focus of their Community Action Plans and goals for impact that are submitted to CSBG every year. While all agencies provide several similar programs, they also have the requirement to assess the uniqueness of their service area to be able to identify additional gaps in services or barriers that may exist. These community needs assessments provide great information to enlist partners at all levels such as funders, volunteers, and more. At the end of each fiscal year, agencies then report on their results. This report includes answers to questions such as did you meet your anticipated results? Why or why not? Help detail challenges or successes in those efforts. And one final item I will note is that our program is the only service provider network in Nebraska that serves every community. This would not be possible without CSBG funding and I'll ask you to-- for you to continue supporting this funding and happy to answer questions you may have. And you will see I've left you a couple of-- we've got our most recent impact report. Director Grotrian gave you that for '25, excuse me, '24 numbers that have just been completed. And this report is based on FY '23, but you can see the, the-- both the financial impact on the economy as well as the impact on numbers that we assist have been pretty, pretty consistent in the 4 years I've been here. So with that, if you have any questions, I'd be happy to try to answer those.

HARDIN: Are there any questions? Senator Ballard.

BALLARD: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for being here, Tina.

TINA ROCKENBACH: Yeah.

BALLARD: And you mentioned benchmarks, I don't know the terminology you used, how do you formulate those benchmarks?

TINA ROCKENBACH: Yeah, so the, the, the goals and the outcomes?

BALLARD: The goals,--

TINA ROCKENBACH: Yes. Yeah.

BALLARD: --that's what I'm asking.

TINA ROCKENBACH: So every agency, when they put together, and Aaron is here with ENCAP and he can give you even a more, you know, kind of, kind of frontline view on that, but essentially what happens is every agency, and this is nationwide, this isn't just for Nebraska, every Community Action Agency puts together that Community Action Plan. They submit it to the state CSBG office, that goes on up to the federal government. And, essentially, that's the plan that says here's what we know our area needs, here's what our numbers are showing. If it's the year they do their community needs assessment, they'll bring that into it as well and then they set goals for each of those programs. And in relation to the funding, we want to make sure we're using all the funding, right, and being fiscally responsible and also reaching as many we can. But the other piece of those goals is implementing steps in there to make sure clients are achieving that, right? And also part of that is incorporating goals for the clients for their own accountability. So it's, it's kind of a, it's kind of a tiered, I guess, for lack of a better word, because there's a lot of things, it's not just an overarching goal of, like, how many did you serve, right? It's broken down by different organizational standards is what they call them. I believe there's over, I don't know how many, hundred of them. But then when they come back around the end of the fiscal year, they have to fill out all those work standards that says, so how did you address this? How did you approach this? What was the goal? Did you reach your outcome? And they turn all that in at the end of the year.

BALLARD: And there's some funding attached to that.

TINA ROCKENBACH: Correct, correct. So all of that goes up to OCS, which is Office of Community Services that manages and distributes all of the CSBG funding down to the states. And so they are the main, for CSBG funding, they are the main people who oversee that. So very similar to Head Start, for example, which has a different funding

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stream. They have their own reporting, their own plans, they have to make their own standards that they have to meet and report on it as well. So that's what CSBG is. And if you look in the act, it actually says it creates the Community Action Network. So this is what nationally every Community Action Agency has to do.

BALLARD: Thank you.

TINA ROCKENBACH: Yeah.

HARDIN: Other questions? Senator Hansen.

HANSEN: So Senator McKinney had a bill, I think it's his priority bill [INAUDIBLE],--

TINA ROCKENBACH: Yep.

HANSEN: --juvenile pilot program.

TINA ROCKENBACH: Yep.

HANSEN: Is that something that you would end up, like, helping fund?

TINA ROCKENBACH: The, the poverty elimination plan--

HANSEN: Yes.

TINA ROCKENBACH: --is that the one you're talking about?

HANSEN: There's a pilot program [INAUDIBLE], I think it's his priority bill [INAUDIBLE].

TINA ROCKENBACH: Right. So we wouldn't necessarily fund something directly, but a lot of programs like that, especially locally, are what our agencies would partner in. Depending on funding depends on whether or not it would fit under what's eligible.

HANSEN: Anything you listed off sounds almost exactly like what he was trying to accomplish.

TINA ROCKENBACH: Yeah, and he had-- if you remember it last year, his LB840, the poverty elimination plan, that was one that both our Lincoln and our Omaha agencies have been part of those planning commissions, too. So, yeah. And so some of that it just depends on if we have to get additional funding or if we have to-- if it falls into something we already have--

HANSEN: OK.

TINA ROCKENBACH: --based on the specific grants.

HANSEN: So would you, like what, provide a grant for something like that to, to--

TINA ROCKENBACH: So we wouldn't provide the grant, we actually are the grant recipients--

HANSEN: Yes.

TINA ROCKENBACH: --of all these funds, right, so we wouldn't provide grants, but if we would partner in a way, we would provide the service is usually how all of our programs work.

HANSEN: Like inside the center that he's trying to establish.

TINA ROCKENBACH: Possibly, yes, it, it just depends on-- we don't do a lot with, like, I think you're talking about his youth criminal justice.

HANSEN: Yeah, I'm just--

TINA ROCKENBACH: Yeah.

HANSEN: --yeah, I'm just making sure we're not being duplicative here, right? So [INAUDIBLE]--

TINA ROCKENBACH: Right, exactly, absolutely, absolutely.

HANSEN: --the exact same thing he's trying to do--

TINA ROCKENBACH: Right.

HANSEN: --but you're getting--

TINA ROCKENBACH: Right.

HANSEN: --federal money for it, now we're paying state money--

TINA ROCKENBACH: Right.

HANSEN: --for a pilot program that you guys are already doing which doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

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TINA ROCKENBACH: Right. So the criminal justice, youth justice, is that the bill that you're talking about with his or are you talking about the other?

HANSEN: Oh, I think it's his pilot program, somebody else maybe--

RIEPE: [INAUDIBLE]

TINA ROCKENBACH: Yeah.

HANSEN: Yeah, where he's, like, trying to set up a juvenile center. It's almost like a YMCA [INAUDIBLE]--

TINA ROCKENBACH: Right, right, right, right, right.

HANSEN: --to help with education, to help, you know, provide, you know,--

TINA ROCKENBACH: Right.

HANSEN: --clothing and material, and a place for [INAUDIBLE] to kind of learn how to do things, results [INAUDIBLE] that you're talking about.

TINA ROCKENBACH: So ours, ours focuses more on the family as a whole and kind of the head of household. So that might be a program that we would partner with for specific things, but how they would bring us in would be, OK, here's this youth, so the center is focusing on, you know, I'm just going to give an example, maybe United Way is helping, maybe some other local areas, etcetera, or state funding. But then how Community Action would partner with that, for example, would be here's this youth, but what's the whole wraparound situation of that youth? Does the family need support? Does that family have some barriers that they just need some education for example. So while the youth is being focused on, Community Action could help support the family as a whole, whatever that family unit might look like--

HANSEN: OK.

TINA ROCKENBACH: --for that youth.

HANSEN: OK.

TINA ROCKENBACH: Um-hum.

HANSEN: OK. All right. Thanks.

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HARDIN: Other questions? Seeing none, thank you. Other proponents? Welcome.

AARON BOWEN: Thank you. Good questions. Good afternoon, Chairperson Hardin and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Aaron Bowen, A-a-r-o-n B-o-w-e-n, and I'm Executive Director of Eastern Nebraska Community Action Partnership and the Bellevue Food Pantry. We're the Community Action Agency designated to serve Douglas and Sarpy Counties and are a recipient of the Community Services Block Grant funding. I have worked in Nebraska's Community Action Network for the past 20 years. My agency, along with our 8 peer Community Action Agencies statewide, utilize CSBG to respond directly to the critical needs of Nebraskans, to collaborate with faith communities, local government and civic groups to create and implement high-impact initiatives, to leverage tens of millions of dollars in support of our work, and to employ hundreds of talented staff. Our boards of directors together, bring together community representatives, elected officials, and private sector leaders to ensure that our agencies are managed effectively and efficiently, are accountable to the communities we serve, and that we elevate the voices of people facing poverty, including families, young adults, seniors, veterans, and active duty military members. No household is immune from crisis, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to ending poverty in our state. For some, living without basic resources and little hope is all they have known. For many, they are facing these challenges for the first time and struggle to know how and where to access help. When someone comes to our door, our focus is to understand all they are facing and to walk alongside them as they set goals and make a plan for changing their circumstances. Ultimately, we want them to gain the resources, knowledge, and confidence they need to gain their footing and build a brighter future. In alignment with CSBG requirements, our approach to reducing the causes and conditions of poverty is systematic. We assess community needs and resources, plan and implement programs that fill identified gaps, evaluate our work, and adjust what we do based on what we learn. I have provided you with information about ENCAP's Match Savings Program as an example of this work. Recognizing 2 years ago that our emergency assistance program in Douglas County was not leading to sustained economic stability of households served and that many other organizations were providing this immediate support, we began work to replicate an evidence-based program locally to help families build their savings and improve their short- and long-term financial well-being. We launched this program in February of this year with 15 households, including 5 seniors on fixed incomes, and we are already seeing positive gains. Community Action Agencies evolved

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as conditions demanded. During the flooding of 2019 and the COVID public health emergency, folks looked to us to mobilize new resources and take action. Now, with the threat of funding cuts to programs that help our participants maintain their stability, we must be ready with creative solutions and resolve. The CSBG funding enables us to pilot new programs, cover operating expenses and program shortfalls, add team members where needed, and ensure that our data proves our results. The support and guidance of Nebraska DHHS, particularly Matt Thomsen and Jill Giles in the Office of Economic Assistance, play a pivotal role in our success in doing so. In closing, every Nebraskan deserves the opportunity to thrive, and our participants do the hardest work to improve their lives. Trusting and partnering with us, they become first-time homeowners, they earn better paying jobs, they find primary health care for the first time, they finish their degree, they put food on the table, they prepare children for school, and much more. Our Community Action Network serves Nebraska with innovation, persistence, integrity, and humility, and the Community Services Block Grant plays a crucial role in what we do every day. Please rely on us as a resource in your community and let us know how we can help. Thank you for your time, be happy to answer any questions.

HARDIN: Thank you. Questions? How's your food pantry going?

AARON BOWEN: I mean, it's going, it's going well. We, we recently purchased, we purchased in October-- well, 2 years ago we purchased the Bellevue Public Library, the old library. So that will become our new Bellevue Food Pantry. So we're in the process of a capital campaign right now. We're about halfway toward our goal. So the goal is to break ground next year and open by the end of next year because a vast difference in the number of nonprofits serving Douglas County versus Sarpy County. So in Bellevue, we're one of the major nonprofits, so we're really excited to open that and open more services at that location.

HARDIN: When do you think that might be ready?

AARON BOWEN: I mean, our goal is to open by the end of '26, so we'd like to start construction early in '26 if fundraising goes well. It's about a \$7.1 million campaign.

HARDIN: OK. And you're about halfway there?

AARON BOWEN: Yeah.

HARDIN: OK. Senator Hansen.

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HANSEN: What's the Match Savings Program?

AARON BOWEN: So--

HANSEN: Is that where you are giving people money?

AARON BOWEN: Yeah, so if you remember several years ago there was, at the federal level, there was the Individual Development Account Program where folks would save and they would get money matched to do-- purchase a car, go back to school, start a small business. So NeighborWorks America has piloted a Match Savings Program in a number of communities and so we're piloting this Sherwood-- the Sherwood Foundation Omaha funded a 2-year pilot of this program. And then our partner is Cobalt Bank, because you have to have a banking partner who will open these savings accounts and allow us access so we can help people make their contributions. So it's a minimum of \$10 per month. They have to submit every single month and we'll match up to \$600, 2 to 1 if they save up to \$600 after the first 6 months. So if someone saves \$600 we're going to match that with private funds, 2 to 1, so \$1,200.

HANSEN: Private funds from--

AARON BOWEN: Sherwood, the Sherwood Foundation. This is to pilot the program. And then if they stay in the program another 6 months, we'll match it 3 to 1 with Sherwood funds.

HANSEN: OK. Who, who's eligible for that?

AARON BOWEN: We-- it's, it's pretty-- right now we have 10 families who come to us from the BRIDGE Family Resource Connector Network in Omaha, which is another nonprofit, so they refer their families over, and they're contributing funds to the program as well, and then we have 5 seniors, and so we try to make eligibility pretty low, but we want people that are poised for success. So someone who comes in who's seeking to cover the utility bill to just make it by this month, probably not ready for a Match Savings Program, so it's kind of like-- I think our, our max is 200% of the federal poverty line to make sure they have some income coming in, even if it's on a fixed income, to make that minimum deposit of \$10 per month in their account. And some people are going to save more, some save, save less, but that \$10 amount is to make sure-- the goal is not necessarily the amount but to develop the habit of saving. So it's based on the financial social work model. So we really want to make sure people understand why they do what they do with the money they receive. And so they're really

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poised to build that savings, but, ultimately, we want them to build wealth. So the goal is them not to come back to an agency like mine to rely on rent money or, you know, emergency payment, because there's so much of that, those funds in Omaha that other agencies provide, we just identify that we don't need to be as big of a player in that. So that's that, what Tina was talking about, it's our opportunity to pick and choose based on what we feel like we can do best with our team versus duplicating other services that other agencies provide.

HANSEN: So you want an intermediary between the Sherwood Foundation and the person who's receiving the funds?

AARON BOWEN: Well, they're one of, they're one of our many funders. I mean, they fund many of the nonprofits.

HANSEN: Yeah, but, like, why wouldn't-- why are you involved in it, why wouldn't you--

AARON BOWEN: Because we're the direct service provider.

HANSEN: OK.

AARON BOWEN: Sherwood wouldn't get involved directly, so.

HANSEN: OK. That's what I was wondering. OK. Well, that's a pretty good deal. Somebody gets-- puts 200 bucks in and they get 600 bucks out.

AARON BOWEN: Yeah, and if they stay in the, the second 6 months, then we'll match it 3 to 1. So they can walk away potentially with \$4,200 in a savings account. And, hopefully, that can prepare them for bigger things down the road. So we're hoping that the private sector will come in and fund it in a few years after Sherwood money ends because it's, it's a real win for folks, too. If folks are concerned about the folks that we serve, you know, relying on agencies for emergency assistance, this-- the goal is to get them to a place where they don't need to return because we saw that revolving door way too much with the folks that we serve. And so our goal is to be the agency that starts to come up with a solution that prevents that in the future.

HANSEN: OK. And are there any qualifications, then, after they receive the money, like, so-- or, or, like, as they receive the money saying, hey, you're getting this free money, this is what we expect of you?

AARON BOWEN: Yeah, during the program they have to show up for financial coaching. They have to show up for, we have monthly meetings

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with the whole group. So there is ongoing coaching involved, that you don't--

HANSEN: OK.

AARON BOWEN: --because the challenge is when you bring, when you give someone, say, emergency rent assistance, we can offer coaching or case management. But once your immediate need is met we see people that say, you know, no thank you. So the goal is they sign a contract that during the course of the program they're going to stay in touch with us. And we've got people, we've got our participants calling us to say, hey, I'm thinking about making this purchase should I do this? Well, let's talk about this. What are your goals? What are your values? So that process is really working and then the seniors with fixed incomes, it's amazing because they don't have much money to play with anyway and they've really taken to this program so we're excited about just beginning, but our goal eventually is to expand into Sarpy County as well, so.

HANSEN: OK. All right. Thank you for explaining that.

AARON BOWEN: Um-hum.

HARDIN: Other questions? Thank you.

AARON BOWEN: Appreciate it.

HARDIN: Other proponents? Welcome.

MARY SPURGEON: Good afternoon, Senators, good to be here. My name is Mary Spurgeon. I am testifying in my capacity as a member of the Board of Directors for the Eastern Nebraska--

HARDIN: Could you spell your, your name please?

MARY SPURGEON: Oh, sorry. Surely. Mary, M-a-r-y, Spurgeon, S-p-u-r-g-e-o-n. I'm testifying in my capacity as a member of the Board of Directors of the Eastern Nebraska Community Action Partnership, or ENCAP for short. My seat on that Board is by virtue of being an elected official. I serve on the Board of Directors for the Omaha Public Power District. I represent Subdivision 3, basically the eastern half of Sarpy County. ENCAP invited me to join their Board of Directors in late 2022. I was attracted to joining the Board when I learned that ENCAP had taken over operation of the Bellevue Food Pantry when the needs of the pantry had outgrown the resources of the Bellevue Ministerial Association to organize and administer it. Having

resided in Bellevue since August of 1988, I have long known about the pantry. Since 2008, the status of the pantry has become more visible to me. I have seen use of the pantry grow and grow, year after year, not only after the economic crash of 2008, but long after we were supposed to have recovered from that crash. ENCAP's primary service focus is getting food to food insecure people in the Omaha metropolitan area. From their main office in northeast Omaha, they deliver food as far south as Plattsmouth, as far north as Blair, and as far west as Valley. ENCAP's experienced and efficient staff organize food received from federal government and general public sources, package it according to the rules, deliver it either directly to those in need or on the outskirts of ENCAP service area to trusted volunteers who personally know those in need in their communities. A long-time presence in northeast Omaha, ENCAP provides wellness services to senior adults, age 60-plus, residing in that community. These include programs to improve and maintain physical strength and mobility, as well as gardening and nutrition classes, and programs to address emotional and social needs. The programs adopted to address these needs have been thoroughly researched for effectiveness in keeping with the Community Action Partnership requirements to provide evidence-based services. Together, these programs provide needed assistance and support to help seniors to continue to live independently in their own residences, thereby reducing costs to provide care in nursing homes. The Bellevue Food Pantry is ENCAP's primary service point in Sarpy County. In comparison to Douglas County, as was mentioned earlier, Sarpy County is underserved in terms of nonprofit services for vulnerable populations. Bellevue has the highest poverty rate in Sarpy County at 8.7%. Need and usage of the pantry has continued to increase in spite of the county's booming economy. In addition to walk-ins, the Bellevue Pantry delivers food to individual households who are unable to visit the pantry due to mobility or health issues. It offers food support to Armed Services veterans as well as some active duty personnel whose enlisted pay is not enough to adequately provide for their family. An additional detail of care is that the Bellevue Pantry provides meal-based distribution. That is, the items supplied are coordinated with recipe suggestions so that families can make a meal out of the food that they receive. This helps to reduce the stress of meal planning as well as giving relief to already stretched budgets. And just a note, most people who use the services of a food pantry do so occasionally, usually in response to a family emergency, an unexpected car repair or other bill, illness of an earner or sudden job loss. Having low income makes it really hard to develop the savings' need to bridge these difficult circumstances. Like ENCAP itself, the Bellevue Pantry is a

highly trusted entity with great community support. Businesses and schools regularly sponsor food drives to help keep the pantry's shelves full. A few months ago, I asked if I could volunteer there as a Board member to just kind of learn more about it from the inside, and I was told all the slots were full. A very happy circumstance. As with all Community Action Partnerships, ENCAP's proven track record of results is built upon innovative, responsive, and efficient programs that are uniquely tailored to meet local needs. It works by partnering with other entities in the community to strengthen economic mobility for families and individuals. The Eastern Nebraska Community Action Partnership, whose mission is to provide high-impact programs to help people get ahead, uses the block grant sent by the federal government and distributed by the state to provide these and other services. As question referred, at this time it is uncertain whether the federal government will keep its word and send the remainder of the block grant moneys for 2025 to the states. Block grants for 2026 are at the mercy of the current federal budgeting process, as is the fate of the staff of all Nebraska Community Action Partnerships and the many people that they serve. Maybe we should just try not to worry about that, I'm sure, but thank you for your attention.

HARDIN: Thank you. Questions? Seeing none, thank you.

MARY SPURGEON: Thank you.

HARDIN: Other proponents? Any opponents? Anyone in the neutral? If not, thank you so much. This concludes our hearings for today. We will go into exec.