

recognizes that those first four or five years of life are an extremely significant part of their lives in terms of personality, development as well as learning. If anybody has any doubts about that, I'd be glad to dump off about a crate of research that would support that. But it also recognizes that whether we like it or not, or want to encourage it or not, we have a very, very high number of children in Nebraska in child care environments. Over 70 percent of the children under age five are in some kind of child care arrangements. Over 57 percent of our children under the age of one are in child care environments. This bill attempts to recognize several critical issues related to child care in the State of Nebraska as well as across the nation. One of those is accessibility to child care. There are many issues related to this. Some of that is geographic. There are certain areas of the state which have no child care or certainly not sufficient amount of child care and, in fact, some people who have provided child care who have really intended to simply try and respond to the need to child care have been caught caring for too many children and knowing that it is not the best arrangement and yet not being able to tell people no and be at risk for those children having no supervision. We also have issues of accessibility in terms of age. It is extremely difficult to find infant child care. It is also somewhat difficult to find good care for those children for before and after school, particularly those that are in that age between eight and ten who still need some supervision, but not as much. At least they don't take as much as children who are younger. We also have some issues of accessibility in terms of children who have special needs or disabilities. I did a survey about three years ago of the entire state. We have probably 3,000 children under the age of five who have been identified of having some kind of handicap. If even 50 percent of them need child care, we have probably less than a third slots available for the number of children with special needs that need it. The second critical issue is affordability and hopefully with the subsidies from the federal government as well as addressing the Title XX payments for child care being at market rate should help us address that. One of the really critical issues has become those people who are slightly above the poverty level and are not eligible for a lot of assistance are having a terrible time in terms of being able to find affordable child care. The third issue is probably the most significant one and that is how do we address quality care? If the early years are so terribly important and we have so many children in these environments, then it's particularly critical