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Chairperson Sen. John Stinner & Appropriations Committee Members
Dist. #48, Room 1004 State Capitol
PO Box 94604
Lincoln, NE 68509

February 4, 2021

RE: LB383

Dear Senator Stinner & Appropriation Committee Members,

My name is Jasmine L. Harris. I am the Director of Public Policy & Advocacy for RISE. I request that this letter be included as part of the public hearing record that shows RISE is in opposition of LB383.

RISE is a non-profit that works with people who are currently and formerly incarcerated. We run a six-month program that focuses on employment readiness, character development and entrepreneurship. We've been serving people incarcerated at seven of the Nebraska Correctional Facilities since 2016 and we offer reentry case management services as our program participants return to communities.

RISE's vision is that all people will find freedom from cycles of incarceration. Even though we serve in the facilities, we understand that there needs to be more efforts around decreasing the population that enters the criminal justice system and preparing people for successful reentry. Our collective goal should be to keep people out of prisons, so building another one should not be the solution. There have been many senators in this legislative body introducing bills that would support alternatives to new prisons to help alleviate overcrowding, understaffing, and other issues within the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (NDCS). We know that appropriating tax dollars to build a new prison is not a solution to meet that goal.

Creating a new 1,500 bed facility will still need to be staffed. As we all know, we're not just facing an overcrowding issue, we are facing an understaffing issue which is a component of overcrowding. According to the NDCS Quarterly Population Summer October - December 2020, the projected annual turnover rate for protective services is 26.58%. Although an agreement has been reached to increase staff wages and recruitment efforts, there is still a concern about being able to properly staff and provide programming in another building. This will create issues with safety and we know that when the incarcerated population can't be supervised with the right amount of staff they are placed in modified operational lockdown. These lockdowns are normally during times where people are able to access prosocial programming.

We also run into the issue that the building of a new facility or expansion of the current ones will not be completed for a few years. We are already operating in crisis mode and need to look at other options that can immediately attend to the problem at hand. There are many things that funding can be allotted for outside the building of a new facility or expansion of a current one. An option can be to look at people who are currently serving sentences for offenses that may have undergone sentencing restructures or



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became legal. Expanding supervised release options for non-violent offenders is another way that can be explored. According to the Nebraska Department of Corrections website, 27% of FY2020 admissions (588) were for drug offenses. Coupled with the expansion of community supervision and funding for mental and behavioral health services, this could be an avenue where we see an impact. When I conducted a facilitated discussion with community stakeholders, mental health was one of the salient themes across the spectrum of incarceration from pre to post. Funding more mental health services for individuals and working with community partners to ensure that people are receiving mental health services is a better option for funding.

If we are truly about decreasing our incarcerated population and lowering recidivism, appropriating more funds towards mental health and substance use services, job programs, diversion courts, organizations like RISE, housing and other pre-incarceration and post-incarceration needs would provide longer term solutions to the problem instead of new prison band aids.

We ask that LB383 not be voted out of committee, but for legislators to look at other alternatives to decreasing the population of Nebraska state prisons through other methods.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jasmine L. Harris".

Jasmine L. Harris, MPH, CHES
Director of Public Policy & Advocacy, RISE