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February 3, 2022

Senator John Stinner and Members of the Appropriations Committee
State Capitol, Lincoln, NE

RE: AG 46 Department of Correctional Services

OPPOSE

Dear Chair Stinner and Members of the Appropriations Committee:

The League of Women Voters supports the humane treatment of those incarcerated. We support both Nebraska's current effort to study the state of corrections and to find alternatives to imprisonment. We **oppose** continued efforts to build a 1,500-bed prison and do not believe it is a solution to Nebraska's prison overcrowding.

A new prison is not Nebraska's first attempt to "cure" overcrowded prisons. Recently, Nebraska has been pouring money into the prison system, yet the number of those incarcerated keeps growing due to increased admissions, extended lengths of stay and reduced parole grants. We have also spent money on capital improvements. In 2017-2019, infrastructure and maintenance projects cost us \$1.3 million for various state prisons. In 2017-18, renovation and expansion for community corrections facilities in Lincoln and Omaha cost another \$13 million, and in 2018-19 another \$8.1 million.¹ Yet, in 2020, Governor Ricketts and NDCS were back at the table requesting a new \$230 million prison.

In September 2020, 70% of surveyed Nebraskans opposed building a new prison.² Given that Nebraska has one of the highest rates of incarceration in the nation without much evidence of successful outcomes, we are frustrated to be footing the bill for a failing system that is in urgent need of comprehensive reform.

In November 2021, Scott Frakes, director of NDCS, spoke at a North Omaha town hall meeting about the new prison. Some in the audience had family members who were, or had been, in prison. They wondered, "Why not take that money and put it into the community where you can create job programs?" Yes, why not? Why not address the root causes of incarceration, and at the community level?

Mr. Frakes spoke frankly when he said his hands were tied. He could not control who or how many individuals entered his doors. His job was to provide for the needs of those sent to him by state laws and the courts. If there was to be a change, it was up to "all of us in this room" and in Nebraska to decide who entered our state prisons.

Last year, with wise stewardship, Senator Stinner and the Legislature set aside \$115 million dollars with \$15 million designated for the Prison Overcrowding Contingency Fund. A prison study developed by the Crime and Justice Institute and the Nebraska Criminal Justice Reinvestment Working Group (CJRWG) identified factors contributing to our burgeoning prison population. Senator Lathrop has proposed L920, a comprehensive bill to put the recommendations of the CJRWG into action. We encourage the Appropriations Committee to redirect necessary dollars to community-based facilities for diversion programs, to education and workforce development, to behavioral and mental health, and to investment in economic development in low-income areas.

Thank you for your leadership in this effort.

Carol Dennison
Social Policy Co-Director, LWVNE

¹ [2017-2019-capital-construction-summary.pdf \(nebraska.gov\)](#)

² [Poll Shows Pushback on New Prison Plan | ACLU of Nebraska \(aclunebraska.org\)](#)