

2023

## Planning Committee 2023 Annual Report

Planning Committee, College of Public Affairs and Community Service, University of Nebraska at Omaha

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## 2023 Planning Committee Report

Sen. Wendy DeBoer, Chairperson

Sen. Tony Vargas, Vice-Chairperson

Sen. John Arch

Sen. Eliot Bostar

Sen. Tom Briese

Sen. John Cavanaugh

Sen. Robert Clements

Sen. Rick Holdcroft

Sen. Teresa Ibach

## Executive Summary

Over the 2023 interim the Planning Committee has held monthly meetings. Each meeting centered around topics the legislative body deemed a priority through a survey that was conducted in early March by Chair Senator DeBoer. These meetings were organized in part with The University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Public Affairs Research, working directly with Dr. Josie Schafer through the interim.

In the first meeting, Dr. Schafer highlighted that state population growth 2010-2020 was strong at 7.4%; however, population growth was concentrated in metropolitan counties of the state and 69, largely rural, counties lost population. The analysis demonstrates that most of the growth in the metro areas is due to Nebraskans moving from rural counties into metropolitan areas and then having families. The main reason people moved away from rural counties was **job availability**.

More people in Nebraska work in low wage jobs than work in high wage jobs. Senators noted the importance of increasing the number of 3-H, high wage, high skill, high demand, jobs in the state.

## Housing

In August Shannon Harner, Executive Director of the Nebraska Investment Finance Authority (NIFA), gave a presentation that largely drew from Nebraska's 2022 Strategic Housing Framework. NIFA suggests the state is at an inflection point due to a lack of available, diverse, affordable, and attainable housing. **The number one reason people left the state of Nebraska entirely was due to housing.** Numerous ideas to increase the supply of housing that Nebraskans wanted were discussed, including:

- Helping new developers in rural areas who build homes without comparables in the area
- Supporting statewide planning and zoning regulations to make it easier to build homes
- Down payment assistance for home buyers,
- Incentives for senior housing
- Rehabilitation of homes to ensure Nebraskan can age in place, and support for existing programs such as the Rural workforce housing Initiative, and growing the construction and trades workforce throughout the state.

## Childcare

The Planning Committee met in September to focus on the demand for early childhood care in Nebraska. The committee received presentations from Dr. Josh Shirk with Voices for Children, and Dr. Katie Bass with First Five. Voices for Children's presentation focused on Nebraska demographics relevant to early childhood education. Nebraska has about 130,000 children under five years old, many of these children live in homes with both parents in the labor force as

Nebraska has one of the highest rates for that in the country. Dr. Katie Bass with First Five focused on the availability, access, and quality of childcare throughout the state.

First Five found that about 112,410 children have a potential need for childcare, yet, currently, there are only about 92,780 available childcare spots, resulting in about 20,740 children without access to care - an 18.5% gap. Moreover, Nebraska has seen a decrease in licensed childcare providers as well as in home-based childcare. There are also concerns about the ability to staff many of the existing childcare centers. There are 11% fewer childcare workers in 2022 compared to 2018, despite increasing demand for these workers.

Areas for possible legislative interventions, include:

- The creation of a sustainable **public or public/private funding** stream for early care and education in Nebraska that provides grants to early care and education providers to support expansion of childcare capacity.
- Improved **incentives to recruit and retain** a quality childcare workforce.
- Address the **affordability of childcare** for families. An example of this would be New Mexico wherein families up to 400% FPL can have a portion of their child care subsidized through a combination of the federal child care subsidy and state funds.

## **Water Quality**

The Planning Committee met in October to focus on water quality in the state. Dr. Daniel Snow with the Nebraska Water Center and Dr. Jesse Bell with University of Nebraska Medical Center presented to the committee. Dr. Snow's presentation focused on Nebraska's drinking water. Nebraska has an abundance of groundwater; however, this groundwater is vulnerable to contamination. The risk factors contributing to nitrate contamination, in particular, of groundwater in Nebraska are the sandy soils in the Platte River valley and the Elkhorn River Valley, high irrigation well density, and a shallow water table. The levels of groundwater and the rural nature of the state has led to high usage of wells for water supply in the state. There are roughly 150,000 domestic wells around the state and only 34,000 are registered. Public water supply is regulated by the USEPA under the Safe Drinking Water Act, this supply is subject to annual monitoring, but domestic wells are not required to test their water quality annually, even when registered. Research has found that 20% of domestic wells contain chemicals above the recommended health benchmarks. Of these chemicals, nitrates are often present at high levels, but this isn't the only contaminant. Dr. Snow and Bell suggested three policies to address these issues:

- 1) Promote **educational** programs to increase understanding of proper use/management of groundwater for drinking water supply in Nebraska and the health risks of not monitoring well water quality.
- 2) Support continued **development of geospatial Agrichemical Clearinghouse database** and expanding current monitoring of domestic wells.
- 3) **Review current regulatory programs and incentives** aimed at controlling nonpoint source pollution in Nebraska.

## BACKGROUND

### History

The Legislature created the Planning Committee as a special legislative committee in 2009 through the passage of LB 653, which was introduced by Senator John Harms of District 48. Senator Harms' Statement of Intent stated the following reasons and purposes for the bill:

LB 653 would create a planning committee within the Legislature. This special committee would be charged with collecting and analyzing data about Nebraska, including, but not limited to: demographics, workforce, education, wages, wealth, tax structure, revenue, natural resources, assets, challenges, trends, and growth and efficiency of government. The committee would also identify long-term issues significant to the state, set goals and benchmarks, issue a yearly report of their findings, and propose legislation. Long-range planning is important and this committee would help Nebraska keep a continuity in policy to achieve the long-term goals of the state.

LB 653 was referred to the Executive Board, which held a hearing on the bill on February 20, 2009. At the hearing, Senator Harms and Ron Withem with the University of Nebraska testified as proponents, with no opponents or neutral testimony. The Executive Board voted 7-0-0-2 to place the bill on General File with a committee amendment, AM 1071. The Legislature ultimately passed LB 653 on a 46-0-1-2 vote. Governor Dave Heineman signed the bill into law on May 13, 2009. The law itself has remained unchanged since its enactment.

## 2023 Planning Committee

The Planning Committee of the 108th Nebraska Legislature was made of the following:

Sen. Wendy DeBoer, Chairperson

Sen. Tony Vargas, Vice-Chairperson

Sen. John Arch

Sen. Eliot Bostar

Sen. Tom Briese- (with Senator Aguilar stepping in as acting Executive Board Chair.)

Sen. John Cavanaugh

Sen. Robert Clements

Sen. Rick Holdcroft

Sen. Teresa Ibach

March 7, 2023 Chairperson DeBoer emailed all Senators in the body a survey to determine which issues the Planning Committee should focus on. The top issues were Housing, Childcare, & Water. These issues were later discussed in issue specific meetings as described in this report.

During the November meeting of the Planning Committee, the Committee discussed legislative solutions to the areas they were most concerned about. Based on these conversations, the planning committee decided to focus on housing.

## **Demographics**

The Planning Committee held their first interim meeting on July 21st at the Capitol. During the opening of the meeting the committee went over the history and purpose of the Planning Committee, making note of the role the committee plays in examining subject areas that other standing committees don't, its goal to research issues areas that impact everyone's constituents over the long-term, and the importance of creating an overarching legislative response.

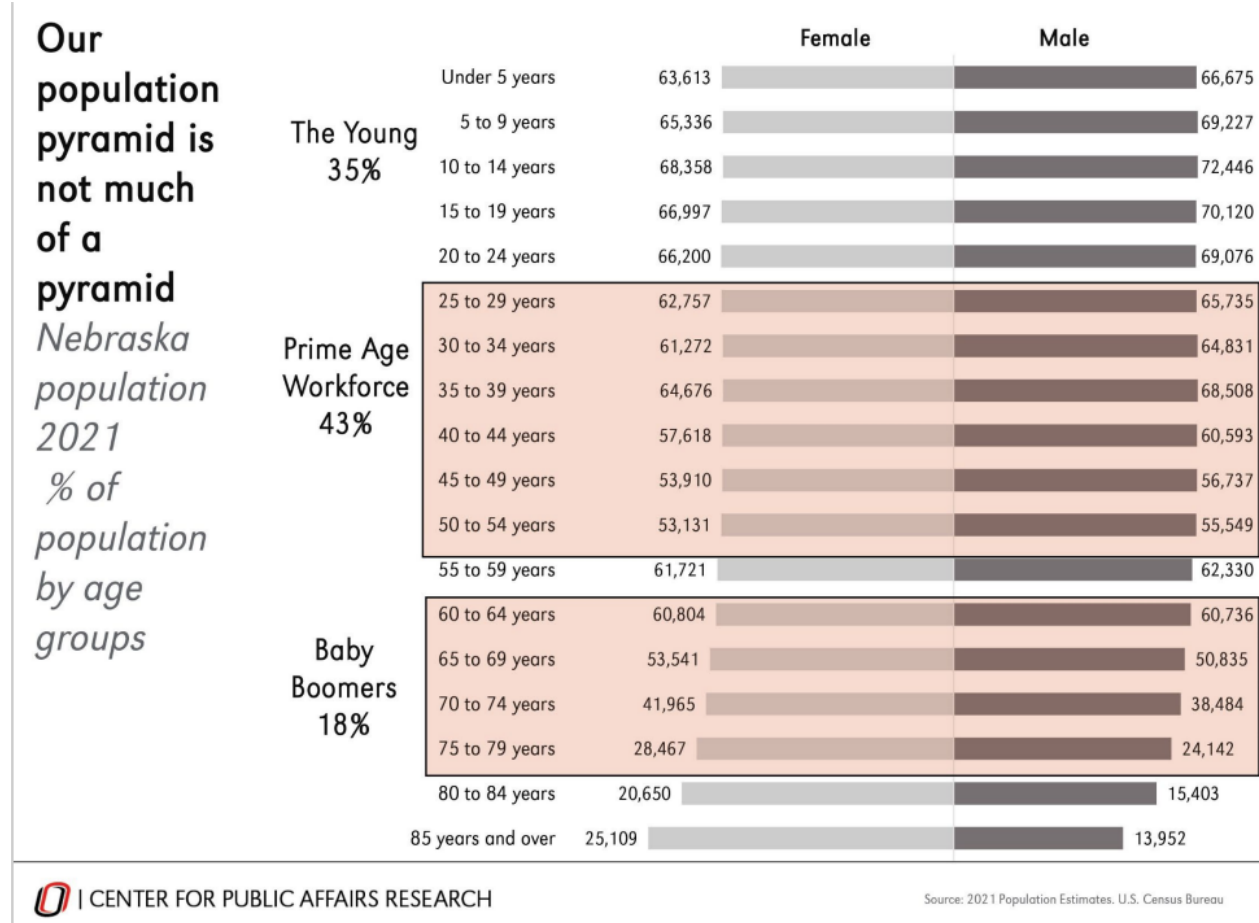
The committee created two subcommittees: Rural Futures and Urban Futures. Sen. Holdcroft and Sen. Ibach agreed to participate in the Rural Futures Subcommittee. Sen. DeBoer, Sen. John Cavanaugh, and Sen. Vargas agreed to participate in the Urban Futures Subcommittee. Those participating in the subcommittees were asked to meet once between the monthly Planning Committee meetings to discuss the implications of the subject area. These subcommittees were given the opportunity each monthly meeting to highlight solutions, concerns, or future questions for the whole committee.

Dr. Josie Schafer, who serves as the Director of the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR), explained the history of the Planning Committee's partnership with CPAR. CPAR was engaged by this committee, at its inception, in part due to its relationship with the United States Census Bureau. They are considered the state's data center. This data can be used to examine a range of policy topics and areas of interest to the committee. CPAR receives around 100 census data requests annually and gives about 40 presentations on the demographics of Nebraska. CPAR also researches policy and creates policy evaluations for a range of state and local governments, including the committee. On their website, [cpar.unomaha.edu](http://cpar.unomaha.edu) they have demographics data available by county and by legislative district; if you are unable to find certain data there is an option to send a request for the purpose of further research.

## **Nebraska Demographics**

This first Planning Committee meeting focused on the demographics of Nebraska, including the workforce. The presentation started with a broad overview of state trends from 2010 through 2020. Over the last decade, state population growth was 7.4%; however, 69 counties lost population. In 1900, most of Nebraska's population lived in rural counties; today, most live in a county that is part of a metropolitan area. Metropolitan areas contain a city center of at least 50,000 and have several dense areas around the city center with strong commuter patterns into the city for a total population of 100,000. Out of all Nebraska counties, Sarpy County had the largest population growth in the previous decade. Metropolitan counties are growing from multiple factors. About 5,000 people per year leave non-metropolitan counties in Nebraska and

move to metropolitan counties. Once there, many will have families, further growing the population of metropolitan areas. Nebraska’s rate of natural change (birth-deaths) is the 7<sup>th</sup> (close to 6<sup>th</sup>) highest rate of natural change in the country; there is more than one birth for every death in Nebraska. This means our state is growing from within and our state is aging slower than other states. However, the rate of natural change is lower than historical periods. The figure below shows how many people are in the age groups. Today, about 43% of those are in the prime age workforce (ages 25-54 years). The Baby Boomer generation makes up about 18% of our population.



The other source of growth for Nebraska, albeit small, is international migration. Net, about 4,000 people enter Nebraska from international locations every year. Overall, there are just about 140,000 foreign born persons in Nebraska or 7% of the state population. Growth from international locations stands in stark contrast to the net loss of Nebraska to other states every year. Every year about 45,000 people move into Nebraska but about 50,000 leave the state leaving a net loss of Nebraskans to other states consistently since 2010.

The group that is most likely to leave the state are those with a bachelor’s degree or more, often referred to as “brain drain.” Dr. Schafer noted those with a high school degree or less are less



likely to leave the state. For those with some college or an associate degree, Nebraska has seen a net gain overall since 2010 but the numbers are lower in recent years. Additionally, those most likely to leave the state are in their prime workforce ages, 26-45, 54%; 71% are employed; and 61% earn wages from a private company. People who leave the state are most likely to be employed in the fields of health care (17%), management (7%), and education (7%). When Nebraskans move out of state, they move to most every state, but the largest number stay in the region, including Iowa, Kansas, and Colorado. These findings, triangulated with additional data collected on why people leave Nebraska, suggests that job opportunities are one leading reason for people to move.

A question from a Senator on migration trends led to a conversation about remote work. Dr. Schafer noted that the overall rate of fully remote work in Nebraska, compared to other states, was low. Very few people live in Nebraska but work in another state and vice versa. A full brief on the topic was prepared by the Center for Public Affairs and can be accessed by request.

### **Nebraska's Workforce**

Across a range of metrics, Nebraskans are especially hard working. Nebraska has one of the lowest unemployment rates and one of the highest labor force participation rates in the country. Nebraska places 3rd in the country for women's participation in the labor force. Notably, only 8% of women left the workforce after having children. Nebraska also places 2nd in the country for those with a bachelor's degree or more participating in the workforce. While these rates are critical to sustaining the country, they are also a challenge as it means there is not a large pool of available, not already employed, workers to fill open jobs, currently estimated by the Department of Labor to be over 40,000.

Examining the occupations of the Nebraska workforce, Dr. Schafer noted that more people work in traditionally "low wage" jobs than in traditionally "high wage" jobs. Examples of low wage occupations include food service and preparation and buildings and grounds cleaning and maintenance. High wage jobs include computers and mathematics and management, business, and finance. The current occupation mix in Nebraska creates challenges for economic growth. Higher wage earners consume, creating economic activity that is likely to increase demand. Thus wages for individuals in other sectors of the economy also go up. Currently, Nebraska ranks 28th in the nation for full time workers' median earnings. **Nebraska ranks first in the country for people who work year-round, full-time and are in poverty.**

Some policies for further examination, include:

- Scholarships for students to attend in-state universities, for example Georgia SB233, Promise Scholarship Act.
- Income-tax benefits for persons educated in the state that stay in occupations for some period of time.
- Support for entrepreneurs and other home-grown business incentives.


Placemaking activities, such as investments in broadband, education and housing are critical to ensure workers have a good quality of life in the state. Other possible solutions mentioned by committee members were to have more higher education opportunities available in rural counties and ensure internships to help set the economic networks of Nebraskans.

## Housing

The Planning Committee met for the second time on August 29th. The Rural Futures subcommittee discussed ways to incentivize rural construction projects, including smaller square footage single family housing, middle-income/workforce housing, “missing middle” starter homes and pre-assembled homes. The Urban Futures subcommittee focused their attention on the lack of starter homes in Omaha, noting that while that type of housing may exist, the pricing of these homes is not attainable for first-time buyers. The committee also focused on the density of current housing, suggesting zoning changes may allow for more density thereby reducing prices.

After the subcommittee reports, Shannon Harner with Nebraska Investment Finance Authority (NIFA) gave a presentation. The presentation centered on findings from the Nebraska 2022 Strategic Housing Framework. NIFA suggests the state is at “...an inflection point” due to a lack of available, diverse, affordable, and attainable housing. For the existing housing, the age, quality, and occupancy of the homes are the current concern. To follow up on this topic, Dr. Schafer and CPAR created an infographic on Availability and Quality of Housing in Nebraska, see here:

**Table 1 | The Reasons Nebraskans Cited for Moving in 2021 and 2022**



|   | FAMILY |       | JOB   |       | HOUSING |       | OTHER |       |
|---|--------|-------|-------|-------|---------|-------|-------|-------|
|   | 2021   | 2022  | 2021  | 2022  | 2021    | 2022  | 2021  | 2022  |
| Moved within county = 88,000                  | 21.8%  | 15.0% | 4.5%  | 3.0%  | 70.6%   | 71.0% | 3.1%  | 10.0% |
| Moved within state, different county = 52,000 | 41.7%  | 39.0% | 16.7% | 30.0% | 29.2%   | 19.0% | 12.4% | 12.0% |
| Moved between states = 32,000                 | 19.6%  | 18.0% | 34.7% | 12.0% | 17.6%   | 34.0% | 28.1% | 36.0% |

\*See details on reasons in Reference

Source: Current Population Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 and 2022

Ms. Harner touched on the themes that have contributed to the current housing challenges in the state. Starting with the housing crash in 2006, there was a deficit in new housing units produced despite the population growing. To date, there are not enough construction companies and workers to keep up with the demand for new housing units that growing employment has created. There are also different challenges for different communities throughout the state. Communities with a low number of construction workers, which are those typically outside the metropolitan areas, struggle to find available, quality housing. Other groups most impacted by the housing crisis are households earning less than \$75,000 a year, including seniors who are on fixed incomes and need accessibility in their home.

- **While building new houses is a critical step there are numerous challenges that make the new construction of housing stall.** One challenge is the appraisal gap. For new housing to be sold, it must be appraised based on existing comparable homes, “comps.” However, particularly in rural Nebraska comps in the area may not have the same value as a new build. As a result, an appraisal gap may exist – the difference between fair market value and a bank’s appraisal. Developers are unlikely to develop if they can’t ensure they will receive a good rate for their efforts.
- Another challenge is the increased interest rates for financing a home which negatively impacts the margins for developers and increases costs for the purchaser.
- Land is also not readily available in Nebraska, and much of it is involved in agriculture which has a higher sale price than vacationland.
- There is also a lack of a construction workforce, especially in rural areas.
- Some of the housing stock also does not meet the needs of today’s buyers. Retirees are staying in their houses, limiting supply. Much of the housing stock is dilapidated and/or vacant requiring rehabilitation before it can be sold.
- Some solutions for a housing shortage could be to allow for greater density and infill within cities. By increasing density, developers decrease the property size and thus the cost of material leading to less expensive homes for sale. Statewide zoning rules could help to lower costs to developers as well.
- Financial support to developers and buyers can also help, for instance, down payment assistance, reducing monthly costs in relation to utilities or insurance, incentivizing senior housing, and investing in rehabilitation funding. Pillar 4 of the statewide strategic housing plan is to grow the construction workforce. One specific program mentioned was a prisoner re-entry program. Inmates in the last six months of their sentence participate in a program to learn how to build houses.

The Rural Futures subcommittee met with NIFA following the August committee meeting to look at how appraisals of new homes could be changed to encourage moving into new developments. Urban Futures discussed how developers are being taxed. Currently developers are being taxed at a rate that doesn’t encourage affordable housing to be built. Due to lending and interest rates, developers can’t afford to build homes that would aid in resolving the state's housing concerns. Lancaster County has been taxing developers at the market rate which has been harming the ability to make new affordable developments. An abatement or pause would

possibly work, in the past this has been done with lower income family housing and the Homestead exemption.

Following the September committee meeting, Senator Holdcroft reported going on a tour to the Omaha Municipal Land Bank which was established under the Omaha City Council. Currently, the Omaha Municipal Land Bank has a bank of 300 properties in Douglas County. The Land Bank is in the process of creating interest for developers to build housing. Most of the properties in the bank will be for single family housing. The biggest barrier the Land Bank is facing in completing their goals is funding. To get the properties to a place where developers would be willing to come in and start working would cost \$50,000.

## **Childcare**

The Planning Committee met again on September 29th for a meeting on childcare. Josh Shirk from Voices of Children and Katie Bass from First Five presented to the committee. Voices for Children provides the Kids Count report each year to see how child-focused systems in Nebraska have been operating during that year; this report explores how effectively these systems are preparing children to learn and develop. Currently, Nebraska has about 130,000 children under the age of five. There are 485,910 children under the age of 18 in Nebraska. Big urban counties account for 56% of this population. In 2021, 24,609 babies were born in Nebraska, with 36 infant deaths that year- the highest mortality rate is found among the Native American population in Nebraska. Of all children in Nebraska, 94% had health care coverage which was mostly provided through parental employment or public programs.

Dr. Shirk discussed the demographics of Nebraska households in relation to children. 71.5% of children live in housing with married adults, 8.2% of children live in cohabiting households, 1,698 children live in group quarters, and 3,848 children live in non-family households. Nebraska has a child poverty rate of 12.1%; for children under the age of five the rate is 14%. In 2022, the Census Bureau released data from the first part of 2022 and the poverty markers are trending up for children under six and people over 65. For the whole country income is down, but in Nebraska specifically it is trending even lower than the national average. The median income is \$85,000 on average, for married households the income is \$105,000, single income for men is around \$51,000, and for women is \$33,550.

As for demographics around Early Childhood Education, public preschool enrollment rates are declining for the first time this century. Enrollment rates bounced back up in 2021/22, but the rates are still trending below 2019/2020 numbers.

Labor force participation is high for the state of Nebraska at 72.7% and high among households with children in the family. This fact increases the demand for childcare, discussed next.

Following the presentation by Voices of Children, Katie Bass presented for First Five on childcare in Nebraska with a focus on availability, access, and quality. Currently, there are 112,410 children in Nebraska who have the potential need for care. In the states there is a supply of 92,780 childcare slots, resulting in 20,740 children who don't have access to care; an 18.5% gap of potential need. There are direct economic consequences from the lack of availability of childcare openings. There was a \$489 million direct loss of parent income due to lack of childcare, businesses felt a \$234 million direct loss in productivity, and there was a \$21 million direct loss in tax revenue.

Changes in licensed childcare providers from 2020-2023 show that many are going out of business or choosing not to remain in operation. As for family child care homes since 2020-2023, Nebraska is seeing a significant drop. Family-run home childcare centers have decreased to 689 centers from 817, 2020-2023. How these centers are regulated may be a contributing factor, however, many centers are run by a population eager to retire. In addition to the number of centers decreasing, so are the number of childcare workers. In 2018 there were 9.3 childcare workers per 1,000 in population and in 2022 there are 8.3 child care workers per 1,000. There are 11% fewer child care workers today compared to 2018. Nebraska is starting to see an increase in childcare workers, but we have not met pre-2020 numbers. One contributing factor for those leaving childcare work could be tied to the wages. Childcare workers make substantially less compared to the average rate of other Nebraska occupations. In 2022, there was a \$2 jump in wages, but from 2018-2021 there was barely any change in wages. Due to COVID-19 there were grants that applied directly to childcare wages, but it cannot be said that the grant was spent only on wages.

There is also a high turnover rate for childcare workers. Currently, the turnover rate is higher than corrections workers. The primary reason people are leaving childcare jobs is due to wages, many stating that if they got at least \$3,000 more per year they would stay as a childcare educator. While increasing wages for workers is important, if the cost is passed on the families by raising tuition costs, issues may be exacerbated.

The committee discussed Senator DeBoer's Legislative Resolution 151 on Childcare Cost Models.

The Committee Discussed:

- The need to address the affordability of childcare for families. An example of this would be New Mexico wherein families up to 400% FPL can have a portion of their child care subsidized through a combination of the federal child care subsidy and state funds. However, this cannot be done without properly addressing child care subsidy reimbursement rates. Currently, there is a disincentive for providers to accept the subsidy because Nebraska determines reimbursement rates on a market rate survey, which does

not adequately account for the true costs of providing quality child care. *Senator DeBoer is working on legislation that would allow assessments of both market conditions and the true cost of care to inform subsidy reimbursement rates.* This is a critical foundational step that must occur prior to changes to subsidy that would substantially increase the number of families eligible.

Additionally, the committee discussed how it doesn't cost rural providers less to provide childcare, but they are being reimbursed by the state at a lower rate compared to urban providers. In comparison between rural and urban providers taking into account rent, wages, operational costs; the overall cost for rural and urban amounts is relatively the same. Communities For Kids (C4K) is a current program that focuses on rural communities to help childcare providers find staff and help with the cost of opening a center. For rural providers there is an access and affordability concern. For urban providers there is an access concern specifically for infant age children, and affordability is still a concern as well.

The discussion turned to the qualifications required of childcare workers, in particular to background checks.

Another topic was how to encourage people to stay in the profession

- One option is to provide subsidized child care to childcare employees through the federal child care subsidy program. Kentucky recently amended their child care subsidy administrative regulations to disregard all income for employees of licensed childcare when applying for child care subsidy. *The Committee understands that Senator Fredrickson is currently working on legislation that would mirror this change.*
- Other recommendations could include a sustainable public or public/private funding stream for early care and education in Nebraska that provides grants to early care and education providers to support expansion of childcare capacity. Because of the labor-intensive nature of childcare employment, the grant fund uses should include workforce supports as well as capital improvements, with an emphasis on expansion of the 0-3 childcare slots.

The committee discussed:

- private-public partnership between employers and their workers' children, such as having childcare in their place of employment. This was understood to be a limited solution, but one worthy of further examination.

## **Water Quality**

For the final informational meeting of the interim, the Planning Committee met on October 25th for a presentation on water quality in the state. Dr. Daniel Snow from the Nebraska Water Center and Dr. Jesse Bell from the University of Nebraska Medical Center were invited to present to the committee.

After the report, Dr. Daniel Snow from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Nebraska Water Center presented to the committee on Nebraska's water history. Nebraska has and uses a great deal of groundwater – 51% of groundwater is used for irrigation, 13% goes to livestock, 8% is kept for monitoring, 18% is used for domestic, private water supply, 1% goes to the public water supply, and 1% goes for commercial uses. The Southeast part of the state utilizes most of the groundwater, this area also has the highest levels of nitrates contamination. Unfortunately, Nebraska has a vulnerability to contamination, particularly from nitrates. Some risk factors that make areas of Nebraska more susceptible to contamination from nitrates and other chemicals are the sandy soils in the Platte River Valley and the Elkhorn River Valley, a shallow water table where some areas only have 3-5 feet of ground before reaching the groundwater and a high density of private wells for supply water.

Until the late 1900's Nebraska had no regulations for well installation and registration. In 1988, Nebraska Title 178 on Well Standards became effective, and in 1993 the Domestic and Livestock Well Registration started. **Registration does not mean regulation** and at this time registration only **suggests** testing and provides some educational resources. While the true number of wells is unknown, the UNL Nebraska Water Center estimates there are 150,000 domestic wells with only 34,000 registered. Dr. Snow noted that many people don't even realize they can test their well water for contaminants.

The public water supply quality is regulated by the USEPA under the Safe Drinking Water Act. Public supply is subject to annual monitoring and treatment as required. Currently about 20% of the public water supply is required to comply with regulations through quarterly sampling and/or treatment for contaminants in the water. The Safe Drinking Water Act regulates multiple contaminants: 16 inorganic, 55 organic, 4 radioactive, 7 microbiological, 7 disinfectants and disinfection byproducts. **Nitrates aren't the only contaminant found in Nebraska water**, there is a strong correlation between nitrate radon, strontium, arsenic, manganese, uranium, boron, and fluoride.

In closing Dr. Snow suggested the need to:

- **Promote educational programs** aimed at improving understanding of proper use/management of groundwater for the drinking water supply in Nebraska – both domestic wells and public water systems.
- **Support continued development of geospatial Agrichemical Clearinghouse database** and expanding current monitoring of domestic wells.
- **Review current regulatory programs and incentives** aimed at controlling nonpoint source pollution in Nebraska.
- Overall, Nebraska needs to **reduce misperceptions** about the state's groundwater and promote its value.

Following the presentation by the Nebraska Water Center, Dr. Jesse Bell with UNMC presented on the health impacts of water quality in Nebraska. Dr. Bell opened with information on nitrates.

Most frequently, nitrates come from nitrogen fertilizers, animal waste, and human waste. Areas with the greatest exposure to nitrates are found in agricultural areas often correlated with use of private wells. Nebraska has one of the highest rates for pediatric cancer ranking 5th in the United States, with some Nebraska counties reporting even higher rates of pediatric cancer. Nebraska counties with elevated atrazine or nitrate levels reported more childhood cancers than counties with lower levels of these chemicals.

Even beyond the obvious tragic human costs, there are many unexpected costs for families experiencing pediatric cancer. Many families have to move for treatment with the closest center in Omaha, or out of the state. Many families experience a financial burden through loss of a job to be a caretaker. There are also higher rates of bankruptcy, people are twice as likely to go bankrupt if they have a nuclear family member with cancer. A Wisconsin study showed that on average medical expenditures for cancer treatments cost \$250,000 to \$1.5 billion and there is a \$1.3 billion to \$6.5 billion loss in productivity.

Preterm birth and “baby blue syndrome” have also been tied to nitrates.

For example,

- A 1996 CDC study showed a cluster of miscarriages in rural Indiana at the time private wells were reporting 19-26 mg/L of nitrates in the water.
- A California study found an increased risk of preterm births with the drinking water reporting 5-10 mg/L of nitrates.
- A study showed elevated methemoglobin cord blood with exposure to nitrates during the pregnancy.
- Central Nervous System malformations have also been found, 5 out of 6 studies found positive association with nitrates as the cause; 4 of those studies had concentrations of less than 10 mg/L of nitrates.

Some adult health issues included increased heart rate, nausea, headaches, and abdominal cramps and cancers such as colorectal, thyroid, kidney, bladder, and non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Nitrates have also been found to contribute to Alzheimer’s and diabetes. Children’s health is affected by nitrates through their link to pediatric brain cancers, non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

Dr. Bell **recommended more research** to better identify the connections between water quality and health, including,

- collaboration with the agricultural community to identify and address issues,
- identifying high risk areas and populations to provide early intervention, education about treatments and testing of domestic well water .

The committee discussed a possible solution of an informational campaign on the current state of Nebraska’s water. Quality in the states, including rural health care providers passing along



information on how to resolve water quality issues, as well as teaching children in school about well testing and water quality. Currently, there is a program, “Know Your Well,” that teaches middle and high school aged children how to test water quality in wells.

## **Policies Related to Planning Committee Topics in other states:**

- Colorado HB 1304 - State grants for local communities to invest in housing
- Washington S5287 - Financial incentives to developers to build affordable housing
- Michigan SB 145 - First time home buyers savings accounts
- District of Columbia B714 - \$2,000 income tax credits to educators, emergency responders and government employees who are first time home buyers.
- Kansas HB2187 - First time home buyer savings account tax free savings account to be used for buying home
- Florida established the Low-income Emergency Home Repair Program to assist low-income people, particularly older adults and those with physical disabilities, in making emergency repairs.
- Utah SB 217 - Allows for local governments to establish Housing and Transit Reinvestment Zones allowing for up to 80% of future property tax revenue to be invested in affordable housing. State can contribute 15% of sales tax.
- Maine LD 2003 - requires municipalities to allow Accessory Dwelling Units on land zoned for single-family.
- The Nebraska State Government spends the least on “Housing and Community Development” of any state.