**For Release Wednesday, June 23, 2021**

**Capitol View
Commentary by J.L. Schmidt**

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**The Legislature’s Work Continues with Interim Studies**

Lawmakers may not be in session right now, but their work goes on with more than 100 interim studies that could result in some new proposals for discussion next year.

It is tempting to ascribe ulterior motives to the study requests, but maybe the topics are just interesting to the sponsors. For instance, Sen. Ray Aguilar of Grand Island has proposed a study of the operation of the Central Nebraska Veteran's Home, which moved from Grand Island to a new facility in Kearney in 2019. The move was contentious. But surely this study is not about that.

Sen. Tom Brewer of Gordon wants his colleagues to look at the rolling power outages in February. He has been a frequent opponent of public power projects. Anna Wishart and others on the Appropriations Committee want to review and examine staffing at the Department of Correctional Services, from a salary and benefits standpoint. Former Business and Labor Committee Chair Lincoln Sen. Matt Hansen wants to examine the post pandemic financial health of Nebraska’s workforce.

Aguilar was joined by Brewer in sponsoring LR137 to assess the operations and practices of the Veterans' Home which is the newest of the state’s four veterans' homes and is a skilled nursing facility with 225 beds. The explanation of the study says it is intended to determine the level of legislative assistance and support required by the veterans' home. The study shall include: a statistical analysis of historical occupancy and staffing levels; an analysis of workforce availability and current hiring practices; and the level of communication between the veterans' home and stakeholders in the state and community and ways to improve that if necessary. Still looking for reasons it should not have been moved?

The Corrections study, LR129, introduced by Lincoln Sen. Wishart and Sens. Mike McDonnell of Omaha and John Stinner of Gering, is a review of staffing at the Department of

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Correctional Services, including, but not limited to, staff recruitment, staff retention, and staffing levels, and wage compensation at individual facilities. It will also analyze the effects of reduced staffing on the operations of these facilities and offender outcomes. Corrections had asked the Appropriations Committee to set aside millions for construction of a new prison. The committee chose a much smaller amount for preliminary studies on the need for a new facility.

Brewer and four others introduced LR136 is to examine, understand, and evaluate the causes, impacts, and costs of rolling electrical power outages during the extreme weather events of February 2021. The study will identify and evaluate the differing effects, if any, of public power district membership in the Southwest Power Pool (SPP) and the costs and benefits of SPP membership. The study shall include: a determination of the cause, the impact on resources, and the necessity to curtail power usage in Nebraska because of the event; the financial impact of rolling power outages on communities, businesses, and residents in Nebraska; and the governing structures, business models, revenue structures and generating diversity of power entities in Nebraska and regional transmission organizations that are available to Nebraska entities. The list on this one goes on long enough for somebody to grind a good-sized ax.

Hansen’s LR139 seeks to examine the financial health of individuals in Nebraska's workforce over one year into the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes: an evaluation of wages across the state and across industries, including tipped workers, minimum wage workers, and workers with disabilities; analysis to determine whether income earned by Nebraska workers is adequate to afford the cost of living for necessities such as food and housing; standard benefits available to workers, including paid sick leave and paid safe leave, health insurance, and retirement benefits; whether the available benefits promote health, wellness, and long-term financial stability into retirement; and whether available job opportunities align with the types of jobs and benefits workers are seeking. Champion of the working class.

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Stinner’s LR143 is a timely look at the mental and behavioral health needs of Nebraskans and an assessment of the current shortages of providers, services, and resources and what is needed to ensure an adequate delivery system. The study will look at: the number

and location of providers in Nebraska; areas of the state where there are specific shortages; what educational and residency programs are available to prepare more providers; ways to recruit and keep them in areas where there are shortages; and the impact of telehealth availability. Watching out for Greater Nebraska.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years.*