



March 20, 2025

RE: SF 1547 | Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson Appropriation

Thank you Chair Wiklund and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee. For the record my name is Misty Coonce. I am the Ombudsperson with the Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson, often referred to as OOFY.

Our Office was established in 2022 after the advocacy efforts of many Fosters here in our state who were asking for oversight and support as they navigate their way through foster care. We thank you for hearing the voices of foster youth and taking action. Prior to our Office's creation, there was not a clear path for Fosters when they had a concern about their experience in care or were experiencing a violation of their rights.

We officially opened in May 2024 to be a resource to the over 10,000 children and youth placed in foster care in our state. This change marked a significant step toward addressing a critical gap in the system -- a dedicated agency that offers Fosters a safe, neutral space to raise, and solve concerns.

OOFY's mission is clear: to listen, inform, take action, and make recommendations to improve the lives of all Minnesota foster youth, and ensure they are receiving the highest standard of care. However, we recognize that in order for our Office to be truly effective, our outreach to Fosters must be proactive, intentional, and ongoing, not merely reactive.

Since our Office's opening we have received over 130 complaints from people in 36 counties, 20% of which have come directly from Fosters. While this number is not small, we would like to see it significantly increase. If we aren't hearing directly from foster youth, we can't be sure that we are responding to their needs.

We are unique as a state agency in that we are here to listen to children and youth. The Fosters we serve are often experiencing instability and isolation from supports. We know this from the data our state collects, and from our own experiences. Four of our six staff have personal experience in foster care.

Based on the lessons we learned from our ombudsman colleagues in other states, we know the most effective outreach to foster youth is through proactive, in-person connections. For example, the ombudsperson office in Texas has shared that the vast majority of the concerns brought to their attention occur while doing youth outreach. Our office needs to be able to see for ourselves the conditions of the facilities our Minnesota foster youth are in and be sure that they can share their concerns with us privately. The office in New Hampshire visited their youth in a Tennessee facility and identified concerns so egregious that the facility was closed.

We need Minnesota to follow suit. This appropriation would fully support two full-time positions to conduct outreach to Fosters, including in-person visits to facilities in Minnesota and elsewhere, create youth-friendly materials about their rights, and additional capacity to connect with stakeholders that can help spread the word about our office.

The goal of these roles is to not only inform Fosters of our Office, but to equip them with the tools and knowledge to feel empowered as they navigate the often-confusing nature of the foster care system. This outreach goes beyond simply delivering information; it's also about establishing trust and opening a line of communication to our Office, ensuring Fosters know where to turn for support before and when problems arise.

When a young person enters foster care, there is no requirement or system in place to ensure they are informed about their rights or made aware of the resources available to them, including our Office. Getting this information is dependent on whether it is part of their caseworker or attorney's practice. The resources that do exist are not comprehensive, actionable, or accessible. This gap in knowledge leaves Fosters vulnerable and unable to advocate for themselves when their rights are being violated or when facing other challenges in the foster care system.

We are asking for a \$240,000 increase in our agency's base appropriation to allow our Office to fully realize our statutory charge in serving and supporting all Minnesota foster youth.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today and I am happy to answer any questions committee members may have.

Respectfully submitted by:

Misty Coonce

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Misty Coonce".

Ombudsperson for Foster Youth

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