

Thursday, March 4, 2021

Chair Davnie and members of the Committee,

Hello, my name is Ava Kalenze. I am a senior at St. Anthony Village High School, a small, public high school located just outside of Northeast Minneapolis. I have served as a Representative on the Minnesota Youth Council since the fall of 2017, the beginning of my first year of high school. Since, I have held positions ranging from Survey Subcommittee Chair, CD4 Chair, Policy Communications Chair, and MYCC Chair. My titles as a member of the MYC are something I am proud of, yet amount nothing to the people I've met, skills I've gained, and work I've done as a member of the MYC. I am here, today, in support of HF1314 because the Minnesota Youth Council has the potential to uplift, empower, and educate young people as individuals, but more importantly, change the conversations surrounding young people to include them.

In this committee, you have been extremely welcoming of youth voice and the Minnesota Youth Council, for which I am so grateful. If you are not familiar with what our organization is or the purpose we serve, I suggest you look to Minnesota State Statute, sec. 124D.957, which states the language of the mandate that passed in 2013. Subdivision 1 outlines Establishment of the Minnesota Youth Council Committee and Membership, Subdivision 2: Duties, and Subdivisions 3 and 4, partnerships with departments and private organizations, and the legislature, respectively. The Minnesota Youth Council is an organization of 36 young people from all across the state, 4 members from each congressional district and four at-large members. Though the format of our group has changed over the years, we are currently running in a structure with four, issue-focused subcommittees: Health and Wellness, Juvenile Justice, Environmental Justice, and Education Equity. These issues were determined through an in-depth process, citing MYC members for reference, the Minnesota Student Survey, prevalence within the state, existing legislation, community partnerships, and more. The MYCC is required to hold two legislative hearings each session, hear a minimum of four bills, and provide feedback to bill authors and tesifiers as any legislative committee would. The MYC also has the responsibility to advise the state departments on

issues impacting young people. Additionally, the Council works with Community Partners to work on projects in their respective subcommittees, and hosts events to further engage young people in advocacy work, such as Youth Day at the Capitol and the Youth in Educational Leadership Summit.

Given all of this, and the fact that members of MYC are likely among the busiest, most engaged demographic of young people in our state, the responsibility of being a member of the Minnesota Youth Council is a great honor and commitment. An honor and commitment that is not taken for granted, but used to the fullness of its duty. One of the most special things I've observed on the council, is how conversations are so centered on the future. Of course, this can be credited to the nature of the work we do, and policy as a whole. Still, the selflessness that this group works from can only be defined as "visionary". There are few tangible gains that come with membership: no insane notoriety, lobby interests, or paychecks -- just a pretty sweet mark on a resume. Members do this work because they feel compelled to make change and hope that future, young Minnesotans have a safer, healthier, just, inclusive, and more opportunistic path to walk. They do this work because they feel and see and understand the burdens that young people carry -- because they are the young people that carry them.

As I stated earlier, I began my first term as a member of the MYC in the fall of 2017. In February 2018, the Parkland School Shooting occurred. It was one of those moments where things that seem to only exist in writing are on the news. I had heard so much about youth voice in my first five months on the council. I was horribly intimidated by the high schoolers who actually understood policy to the point of having an opinion on it. But I believed in the importance of young people's voices so much that I took to getting to the same point of understanding as them. And then here I was, seeing young people on the news, being listened to, and adults everywhere facing the realization that they didn't know what it was like to experience an active shooter drill, or enter school each day with the threats of violence. Adults were still hesitant to look to students, even though they were the experts of the experience. The MYC wrote a statement about Parkland and the March For Our Lives Movement. While I am proud of so much that the MYC has done, I am significantly proud of that statement and its relevance to that moment.

As a young, white woman from a first-ring suburb, I came to the MYC thinking I knew what diversity was. I was wrong. I have learned about understanding and empathizing, learning and unlearning, respecting and standing up. This is not only a beautifully diverse group, but an inclusive one, that brings power to those who need it and deserve it and so infrequently are given it. I am grateful for this group and the connections I have with people from many backgrounds and many perspectives. It's that same theme as earlier: the group was intimidating in such a sense that I challenged myself to be better.

MYC Members are also paired with an Adult Partner, intended to be a sort of mentor and support system. I am lucky enough to have the former MYC Policy Manager and Master of Human Rights candidate, Bailey Sutter, serve as my adult partner. While the youth of the Minnesota Youth Council are stellar in every way, it obviously wouldn't be possible for our work to stretch like it does without the support of adult partners, the Minnesota Alliance with Youth, and the incredible MYC staff. The adults so committed to supporting and empowering young people that serve with us, not to bring us snacks or hope we have a good time, are integral to the processes and trajectory of the MYC.

I hope I've made my love and support of the MYC clear, through the value I've gained, and the value that MYC has to communities of young people throughout the state. As the legislature functions, there has to be a fiscal note put to that value, however, please recognize that it is necessary to provide young people representation in the decisions that impact them. We are entering a time where, as a society, we can understand the vitality of inclusions and representation, and I ask that you act on that shift and take steps to support organizations like the MYC in doing that work. I hope that you will vote to support HF1314 and not allow our incredible, hard-working, and visionary group to keep functioning as an unfunded mandate.

Thank you so much for listening to young people on the issues that impact them. I yield my time to the chair.