

RE: Fostering Independence Grants (HF 4024)

Chair and Members of the Committee -

My name is Travis Matthews, I am the Senior Youth Policy Fellow at Youthprise. I am also a senior at Hamline University and currently serve as the Student Body President.

Today I am speaking to the proposed waitlist for the Fostering Independence Grant, and the urgent need to bridge the financial gap.

As a recipient of the Fostering Independence Grants, I've been able to continue attending Hamline University. I'm in my senior year, studying legal studies, with plans to attend law school after graduating - a reality that was made possible by FIG and pure luck.

Throughout my first year of college I did not receive FIG. I faced considerable challenges. Even with a generous financial aid package from Hamline, it wasn't enough. The stress of managing my financial aid, covering living expenses, and navigating the complexities of adulthood weighed heavily on me. As a foster youth without the necessary support systems or knowledge of financial literacy, I found myself thrust into a scary world of juggling loans and jobs just to make ends meet. Each day felt like a neverending balancing act, with the responsibilities of managing finances overshadowing my academic passions. It was an isolating experience, as I grappled with the harsh realities of independence without the necessary guidance or resources to navigate them effectively.

As FIG went into effect, after my first year, a huge breath of fresh air entered my life. For the first time, I had actual support, life saving financial support - something that is incredibly rare for fosters, something you all made possible. This program is crucial to fosters being able to access college and beat the gruesome statistics that you all continue to hear time and time again. Less than 3% of fosters receive their college degree by the time they are 25, more than 50% of Minnesota's Homeless youth are former fosters, by age 17, over 50% of fosters will have an encounter with the juvenile legal system through arrest, conviction or detention. In addition, 25% of youth in foster care will be involved with the criminal legal system within two years of leaving foster care. What we are talking about today is more than an education issue. This is a homelessness issue. This is an incarceration issue. This a racial justice issue. This is a queer issue. This is an income inequality issue.

Your own colleagues and minnesotans were so devastated over the recent Star Tribune articles, but this unfortunately has been a reality for fosters and advocates for longer. These articles sparked the Child Welfare Task Force to reconvene and investigate issues

that advocates and fosters have been screaming about for ages. We'd hoped that we'd come in this session with momentum for actual change for fosters that would change the outcomes for fosters across this state, but today I sit before you asking you to change the language in your bill that will negatively impact fosters, instead of what I had hoped for. Instead of moving forward and creating change within the child welfare system, we're taking many steps back.

As a foster, I cannot be more disappointed. If this language passes, it will be a blow to all fosters. Many Fosters already have those who are supposed to support them most telling them that they don't deserve true investment in their futures, and by passing this bill language, you will be sending the same message. The state becomes the guardian of us as we are ripped from our families, you have a responsibility to help us forge our futures, not leave us products of a broken system. If this language passes, you are no different than our parents or the broken system – and this is the reputation you create of the legislature. At the end of this session, while you sit there and cheer about your wins, many fosters won't be celebrating; they will be scraping by just to survive.

*Sincerely,*

*Travis Matthews, Senior Policy Fellows, Opportunity Youth Network*