

March 19, 2025

RE: HF 2009 | Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsman Appropriation

Thank you Co-Chairs Kotyza-Wittuhn, West and Members of the Children and Families Finance and Policy Committee. For the record my name is Misty Coonce. I am the Ombudsman with the Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsman, 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 ombudsman 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



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MINNESOTA
CHILDREN'S
ALLIANCE

March 19, 2025

RE: HF2009 | Funding for the Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson

Dear Chair Kotyza-Witthuhn and Members of the House Children and Families Finance and Policy Committee,

The Minnesota Children's Alliance strongly supports HF2009, which appropriates funding for the Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson (OOFY) to hire additional full-time employees dedicated to conducting outreach and advocacy for foster youth.

OOFY plays a crucial role in ensuring that foster youth have a voice in their care by actively listening to their concerns, addressing their needs, and providing critical information and resources. The Minnesota Children's Alliance represents a network of Children's Advocacy Centers and multidisciplinary teams that investigate child abuse cases. When allegations of abuse arise, children are often placed in foster care for their safety if their parents are unable to provide adequate care. Following investigations, some children transition into permanent foster placements, a process that can be profoundly traumatic.

To effectively serve foster youth, OOFY must have the necessary resources to meet the increasing demand for support services. Additional staffing will allow the office to respond to concerns more efficiently, ensuring that all foster youth receive the advocacy and assistance they deserve.

We appreciate your leadership in supporting this important legislation and your commitment to the well-being of Minnesota's children and youth.

Sincerely,

Marcia Milliken

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The Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson (OOFY) was created in 2024.

OOFY is here to listen to you. If you are in foster care in Minnesota, OOFY's goal is to make sure you receive the high-quality support and care you deserve.

**Minnesota
Foster Youth!**



We Listen

We listen to you about any concerns you might have about your care or services you may be getting.

We Inform

We provide information and resources. We can answer questions about your rights and treatment in foster care.



We Take Action

In some cases, we'll take action to resolve your concerns. We may gather more information, look at paperwork or speak to others. Wherever possible, we will get your permission before taking action.

We Recommend & Report

We may make recommendations to help address your concerns. Our recommendations might go to people like your social worker or the place where you live.





March 17, 2024

Dear Chair Kotyza-Witthuhn and Members of the House Children and Families Finance and Policy,

I am writing to express my strong support for HF2009, which seeks to allocate critical funding to the Minnesota Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson (OOFY) for the addition of full-time employees dedicated to outreach efforts for foster youth.

Quality Parenting Initiative-Minnesota (QPI-MN) emphasizes loving parenting as the shared goal for all children in foster care. We achieve this by empowering those with lived experience to lead, fostering meaningful relationships, and delivering research-informed services. Adequately resourcing OOFY will directly support these goals by enabling outreach that centers on the voices of foster youth, ensuring their needs are not only heard but addressed with compassion and understanding.

Foster youth and families with lived experience in the system are best positioned to inform meaningful change. By providing training led by system-involved individuals, QPI and the OOFY work collaboratively to strengthen relationships between parents, caregivers, and stakeholders. Additional staff would expand OOFY's ability to elevate these voices and offer support where it is most needed.

The foster care system profoundly shapes the lives of young people in our state. A well-resourced OOFY ensures these individuals have a dedicated advocate to navigate challenges, amplify their voices, and advocate for their well-being. In turn, this promotes stronger outcomes in child development, community connection, and long-term success for those impacted by the system.

QPI's approach underscores the power of relationships and the wisdom drawn from lived experiences. By fostering collaboration across child welfare stakeholders—including county agencies, foster care licensing organizations, and community partners—we create a cohesive and child-centered system. This funding request aligns with our collective responsibility to ensure the foster care system reflects Minnesota's values of equity, care, and opportunity for all children.

I urge you to support HF2009 with this essential legislation and to help ensure that Minnesota's foster youth receive the advocacy and resources they deserve through a fully empowered OOFY. Thank you for your commitment to our youth and communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Kate Rickord, MA, LP, SEP'.

Kate Rickord, MA, LP, SEP

Director, QPI-MN

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612.619.0086 (direct)

Ensuring excellent, developmentally informed parenting in the child welfare system.