



March 12, 2022

Dear Members of the Human Services Finance and Policy Committee:

NAMI Minnesota is writing to express its support for HF 3211. This is an important bill that rights a wrong that the state has inflicted upon youth in foster care. It is not easy for youth leaving foster care to transition successfully to adulthood and the State of Minnesota makes it even harder.

The federal government recognizes the emotional and financial impact on children when a parent dies. Just as the Social Security Administration (SSA) recognizes that income is needed for older adults and people with disabilities who cannot have substantial gainful employment, it recognizes that children can lose their current and future financial stability when a parent dies. Some children will also qualify for Social Security benefits due to having a disability.

For a child who enters the foster care system due to the death of a parent the impact of that loss is devastating – there is no longer a family and there is no income. When they turn 18, they often do not have a family to support them as they transition to adulthood. If you have or have had a teenager do you believe that they could have transitioned to adulthood without your help or support?

When the parent of a youth in foster care dies or a youth is certified as having a disability, the county/state becomes their representative payee and actually takes their Social Security benefit to pay for their care. We find this to be a really horrible practice. Children and youth should expect that society will take care of them – and not be required to pay for their own care.

We are only recently learning of this situation due to the *Strengthening Protections for Social Security Beneficiaries Act of 2018 (the Act)* which required stronger monitoring of the use of representative payees by state agencies. Since 2019, more than one-half of states (31) have entered into an agreement with SSA to monitor this issue. Minnesota was not listed as participating as of June 2021.

HF 3211 will set aside any Social Security benefits into a special trust that will be made available to foster youth in the future. The amount - \$10,000 – could be just enough to help the young person pay for living expenses to go to college, a trade school, or work. It's a bridge to independence. A bridge to avert a crisis. It should not have an impact on county or state budgets. The Congressional Research Service estimated that using these children's SSI benefits amounts to about .05 percent of overall spending.

One concern that NAMI Minnesota has is that this may be viewed as a disincentive to screen foster youth for SSI benefits. We hope that some wording could be added to ensure that these children and youth continue to be screened for benefits that could greatly aid them as they transition to the adult world often alone and without support.

As a society we should be supporting children, not taking their benefits to offset the cost of their care. This is the least we can do for these foster youth. Please support HF 3211.

Sincerely,


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Executive Director



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