

Legislative Task Force on Child Protection

Remarks submitted by Misty Coonce, Ombudsperson for Foster Youth

January 11th, 2024

For those who are not aware, the Office of Ombudsperson for Foster Youth was created through legislation in the 2022 session¹ based on advocacy and testimony by current and former Fosters. These Fosters were seeking a mechanism for more oversight and accountability, based on their experiences of “abuse, neglect, discrimination or exploitation at the hands of our very own child protection systems.”² I am grateful for the Fosters who bravely shared their very personal testimony, and for the authors, lawmakers and other advocates who supported the bill’s passing. For clarity, my use of the term “Fosters” in my comments today is in line with the description provided by Foster Advocates³. They describe that early leaders in their network stated foster care creates a significant cultural identity, akin to other immutable characteristics, that goes unrecognized once they are reunited with family, adopted, or age out. In response, they use the term Foster to name and claim this unique identity.

I was appointed by Governor Walz in September 2023⁴ and started in my role at the end of October. The Advisory Board for this office was appointed on November 1⁵, which consists of 15 total members, 9 of which include positions for people who have direct lived experience in foster care. Several other Advisory Board members also bring direct lived experience in foster care, in addition to their professional roles working with Fosters. I also bring my own lived experience as a Foster to this role, combined with professional experience as a social worker here in Minnesota for the past 14 years.

As stated in the enabling legislation for this office, “The foster youth ombudsperson is accountable to the governor and may investigate decisions, acts, and other matters related to the health, safety, and welfare of youth in foster care to promote the highest attainable standards of competence, efficiency, and justice for youth who are in the care of the state.” These requirements and goals are closely aligned with the goal of this task force, as Madame Co-Chair Mitchell expressed last month the importance of a **child-centric focus to better serve the children of Minnesota**. In order to do this, we need to ensure that our state’s decision makers are intentionally seeking input, including complaints and concerns, from Fosters about our experiences, and when warranted, to make improvements based on the things we are hearing, seeing, and learning from Fosters. Feedback, including complaints and ideas for solutions, shared with our government about the services we provide to residents of Minnesota, are a gift. They help us to learn and grow, to do more of what’s working and shift the things that aren’t. They lead to increased trust in government.

This is why I, and many many others, are excited about having this Ombuds office that focuses specifically on hearing from Fosters, the very people our child welfare system aims to serve. I am working diligently to set up the operations and infrastructure of the Office of Ombudsperson for Foster

¹ [Sec. 260C.80 MN Statutes](#)

² <https://imprintnews.org/child-welfare-2/minnesota-foster-youth-ombuds-bill-passed/65016>

³ [Our Approach — Foster Advocates](#)

⁴ <https://mn.gov/governor/newsroom/press-releases/?id=1055-592199>

⁵ [Board/Commission Details \(state.mn.us\)](#)

Youth, and will then embark on outreach to ensure that current foster youth, and those who may have concerns on their behalf, know about this office, what to expect from us, and how to contact us. We have a goal of opening the office by April of this year, to receive complaints, questions, and concerns from and on behalf of Fosters, and to seek appropriate resolution using a Credible Review Process.

Our office is still in its infancy. However, we already have a number of issues that have been identified from Fosters through their testimony in support of the creation of this office, through stories and data shared by our Advisory Board members with me, and from public data regarding our state's concerning racial disparities for African American and Indigenous children and families. These include such things as lacking support for pregnant and parenting Fosters, disconnection between siblings who aren't living together in one home, and a general, but very concerning, lack of understanding about which rights and resources are available for youth and young adults in foster care, just to name a few. I have heard from and about many Fosters who were not aware of their option to remain in Extended Foster Care or about benefits available to them to help them access higher education. I have heard from other Fosters who opted in to Extended Foster Care, and attended college with supports available through existing programs. However, they did not know that they had the benefit of continued health insurance and thus put off necessary health care due to concerns of the costs.

We know that the list of things we can work on in order to improve the experiences of Fosters in Minnesota, is long, complex, and that the issues disproportionately impact marginalized communities who are often unheard or less heard. The Office of Ombudsperson for Foster Youth looks forward to hearing from Fosters, and from others who have concerns or questions on their behalf, once our office is up and running in a few months. We intend to uphold the standards defined by the United States Ombudsman Association in our investigations, which include Independence, Impartiality, Confidentiality, and a Credible Review Process.⁶ And, we look forward to collecting, analyzing, and reporting on data regarding the health, safety, and well-being of youth in foster care, to inform our recommendations for improvement. We will be happy to share our recommendations with this task force, relevant legislative committees, the Governor, and with the public. As this Legislative Task Force on Child Protection continues their work, we thank you for centering the experiences of children and youth, especially those who end up entering Minnesota's foster care system for any length of time. We look forward to being a resource and a partner with you, and the many other stakeholders who care deeply about the safety and well-being of Fosters, in defining solutions for improvement.

Respectfully submitted by:

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⁶ <https://www.usombudsman.org/wp-content/uploads/USOA-STANDARDS1.pdf>