

March 7, 2024

Senator Melissa Wiklund  
Chair, Health and Human Services Committee

**RE: SF 4204 | Ombuds Direct Access to SSIS**

Dear Chair Wiklund and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

The Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson (OOFY) has a statutorily required mandate to 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. OOFY was created through legislation in the 2022 session 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. Our office is still in its infancy. We have a goal of opening the office in the next two months, to receive complaints, questions, and concerns from and on behalf of Fosters, and to seek appropriate resolution using a Credible Review Process.

OOFY strongly supports SF 4204. We thank the co-authors of this important bill in seeing the need for OOFY and other Ombuds offices to have **direct** access to the State's Social Service Information System (SSIS), as a critical tool to fulfilling our mandate and duties. In hearing from Ombuds offices in other states that have a similar focus on serving foster youth as their primary stakeholders, they have shared examples of the importance of direct access to their state's equivalent of SSIS. Foster youth contact Ombuds offices regarding urgent matters that impact their health, safety, and welfare. Sometimes, due to the confusing nature of being in foster care and moving from home to home, a youth in care may not even know what local service agency is responsible for their case. Having direct access to SSIS will expedite the initial information gathering efforts of our office to work toward a timely and collaborative resolution. It will also decrease the burden on staff at the Department of Human Services and/or the local agency in obtaining and sharing the necessary case information with our office.

As our state continues to recognize the need for continued improvement in our child welfare system, we thank you for supporting the work of Ombuds by assuring we have the necessary tools and data access to effectively do our work.

Sincerely,



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