



March 8, 2024

The Honorable Melissa H. Wiklund
Minnesota Senate
Chairperson
Health and Human Services Committee
2107 Minnesota Senate Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

RE: Minnesota Protection Advisory Council (SF 4761)

Chair Sen. Wiklund and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee:

I write to offer my support of SF4761, but also to suggest a change to the make-up of the Council to ensure all critical perspectives in Minnesota's child welfare system are represented. As an attorney who has represented parents and relatives for the entirety of my twenty-years of legal practice, I know the benefit that these advocates and their perspective bring to conversations about system reform and the well-being of children.

Most parents and relatives I have provided direct legal counsel to for many years want nothing more than what is best for their child or family member. Many parents and relatives through their lawyers have advocated more strongly on cases for their children and relatives than the advocates directly responsible for advocating for the child. Parents and relatives are experts on their families – and they often provide the most compelling and accurate information about the unique and very complicated needs of the children they are parenting or caring for. No one knows a child better than their own family.

Yet their voice and perspective are missing from this Council. I urge the members of this Committee to consider adding legal representatives for parents and either legal or community advocates for relatives to this bill as official members of the Council. I appreciate the inclusion of one member of the community with lived experience as a parent or caregiver. However, I think the perspective of an attorney representing parents and a direct advocate for kin or relatives must be included as well.

Additionally, I think a member representing the Minnesota Board of Social Work would be a critical voice to include.

I appreciate the goals of this bill, the need for committed oversight and ongoing engagement from a broad group of stakeholders, and the work that has gone into it. I offer my support, with the critical addition of a few more perspectives.

Sincerely,

Joanna Woolman

Professor of Law, Executive Director
Institute to Transform Child Protection
Mitchell Hamline School of Law Child Protection Clinic