

February 25, 2025

**Re: HF1276 | Northstar Care for Children Benefits**

Dear Chair West and Members of the Children and Families Finance and Policy Committee:

The Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson (OOFY) strongly supports the modification to Northstar Care for Children Program for Fosters<sup>1</sup> under the age of six who reach permanency with relatives or within the Minnesota Indian Family Preservation Act (MIFPA) placement preferences.

Currently, Fosters under the age of six in the Northstar Care for Children Program receive 50% less financial support when they achieve permanency compared to children aged six and older. This disparity disproportionately impacts younger Fosters and their relatives, placing a significant financial strain on relative caregivers, particularly those from low-income families. The lack of ongoing financial support is a barrier, especially for families who often have the necessary non-financial resources and the child's best interests at heart but may lack the financial means to care for them long-term.

Increasing financial benefits for Fosters under the age of six will ensure that their placements continue to receive the critical support to maintain stability. Providing equalized financial benefits will equip relatives with the resources necessary to care for younger Fosters, making it less likely that permanency will be delayed or that children will be moved to non-relative homes outside of their communities. This support can also help prevent families from reengaging with the child welfare system.

In 2023, approximately 45% of the 490 children waiting for adoption were siblings who needed to be adopted together (DHS-4746-ENG 11-24: *Adoption: Finding families for Minnesota's waiting children*). Sibling connections are often most people's longest relationship in life and provide a protective factor for Fosters. Equalizing Northstar Care for Children benefits for children who reach permanency with relatives will ensure relatives are financially supported in caring for sibling groups and keeping them together.

This modification to Northstar Care for Children ensures that Fosters have the opportunity to grow up in supportive, stable homes and maintain connections to their families and communities. Thank you for supporting this legislation and your continuing efforts to improve the experiences of Fosters.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Misty Coonce". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Misty" and last name "Coonce" clearly distinguishable.

Ombudsperson for Foster Youth

651-946-2941

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<sup>1</sup> OOFY uses the term “Foster” following the example of those with lived experience, to refer to people with experience in foster care, no matter their age or whether they were reunited with family, were adopted, or aged out of foster care.