

OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC DEFENDER

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TESTIMONY OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC DEFENDER REGARDING:

House Bill No. 7051

ENTITLED, AN ACT RELATING TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT -- DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES

Chairman Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee:

The Office of the Public Defender **supports** the passage of H7051, which would require the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to establish segregated savings accounts for foster care child receiving SSI, death benefits, veterans' benefits, or railroad retirement benefits to manage the accounts and keep the child eligible for future benefits.

In addition to our criminal cases, the OPD represents parents on the "Dependency and Neglect Calendar" in the Family Court (the civil calendar where DCYF files civil petitions against our clients under allegations that their children are dependent, neglected, or abused). Many times, we represent the parents while they are working with DCYF to reunify with their children. Often, this means that the children are placed in temporary foster care, and the benefits are then diverted into the general system. We believe that requiring the segregation of the funds—**which, after all, belong to the child, not the state**—would benefit both the children in care and the families that are eventually reunited. These children and families are some of the most vulnerable in the state, and it is only fair, right, and just to require the state to properly manage their property while the children are in care.

In addition, for cases where reunification is not possible, these benefits could be life-changing for the children aging out of care. At a time where they are the most vulnerable, this money—**which again, is theirs, not the state's**—is critical to helping them reduce the risk of homelessness and to help to pay for housing, education, and transportation costs. Not only is it the right thing to do, but it is also good public policy: setting up these children for success will benefit the entire community by setting them on the path to productive citizenship.

Accordingly, the OPD **supports** the passage of H7051.

Sincerely,

/s/ Angela M. Yingling

Angela M. Yingling
Legislative Liaison

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