Testimony Re: House Bill 7051, An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government -- Department Of Children, Youth And Families
House Finance Committee
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. We would like to thank Representative Casimiro for sponsoring this important bill and Representatives Donovan, Spears, Shallcross Smith, Kislak, Speakman, Roberts, Hopkins, Alzate, and Solomon for co-sponsoring. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for House Bill 7051, which requires the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) to establish segregated savings accounts for children in foster care who are eligible for social security benefits, supplemental security income, veterans benefits, or railroad retirement benefits.

Foster youth have no obligation to pay for their own care and should benefit directly from federal benefits for which they are eligible. However, nationally, most foster youth eligible for federal benefits, such as social security benefits or supplemental security income, will never see that money or even know that someone has applied for and received benefits on their behalf. However, in December 2025, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, sent letters to 39 governors - including Rhode Island - seeking immediate action to end the practice of child welfare agencies diverting Social Security survivor benefits from youth in care.

The Children's Advocacy Institute of the University of San Diego School of Law released a report that evaluated the policies of all 50 states and D.C. regarding federal benefits of children in foster care. Rhode Island did not fare well in comparison to other states' policies. Rhode Island currently does not prohibit our child welfare agency from using a child's benefits to offset cost for the child's foster care, nor do we require the Department to notify the child, child's parents/legal guardian, and/or child's guardian ad litem (GAL)/attorney when the Department applies to become the child's federal benefits representative payee.

Six states and jurisdictions including Arizona, Kansas, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington D.C. have enacted reforms conserving *all* Social Security benefits of their foster youth, In fact, in 2024, the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families procedurally stopped taking all benefits from their foster youth and has now codified legislation to prohibit the collection.

This bill is important because when older youth age out of foster care without permanency they are at risk for low educational attainment,

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homelessness, and unemployment. These challenges are compounded when youth in care have a deceased parent or live with a disability. Creating a savings account for youth who are eligible for benefits that are set aside for them when they exit care can provide necessary funding for basic needs and planning for self-sufficiency.

This bill would help conserve benefits of eligible youth in an Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) savings account with their benefit being put away for them for their future. For young people aging out of state care, these benefits could be life-changing and are needed to reduce risk of homelessness and to pay for housing, food, education, and ensure stability in their transition to independence. This bill also provides much needed transparency to the youth about the amount of their benefit that the Department has received on the youth's behalf and requires financial literacy training for the youth.

This bill has strong bipartisan support, national support, and is the right thing to do. We urge passage. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.