

**Department for Children and Families
Family Services Division**

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Agency of Human Services

To: The House Committee on Human Services

From: Aryka Radke, Deputy Commissioner, Department for Children and Families, Family Services Division (DCF-FSD)

Date: March 11, 2026

Subject: H. 657

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for your continued collaboration in supporting Vermont's children and youth. I appreciate the ongoing dialogue and meaningful partnership in creating H. 657. Following yesterday's testimony, we felt it was important to provide the committee with a few additional insights from FSD:

Social Security Benefits for Youth in Foster Care

FSD is in support of moving away from applying a child/youth's social security benefits to the cost of their foster care placement. Currently, FSD uses approximately \$812K annually in social security benefits to pay for the cost of care for children/youth in custody. There are two types of social security benefits that each have their own regulations and must be addressed separately. Social Security Disability benefits are based on the qualifying condition of the child and is a need-based program, meaning that the child must be below a financial threshold to qualify for benefits. The other type is sometimes called, "survivor benefits." They are derivative benefits paid to a child/youth based on the disability or death of their parent. These benefits are based on the amount the parent contributed to the social security system, and they have no financial thresholds, but are subject to other regulations.

Due to past budget cuts, FSD has one staff person responsible for managing the social security program. Currently, between the two types of benefits, FSD serves 79 social security beneficiaries. Those 79 children/youth primarily entered foster care with those benefits. Because of our limited staff, we do not routinely apply for new SSI benefits, the exception being when a youth is 17 and about to leave foster care. We prioritize those cases so that the youth can leave with benefits, which will help them as they transition into adulthood. We also prioritize applying for survivor's benefits when it comes to our attention that a child may be eligible because one or their parents is deceased.



FSD applies to become the representative payee if it appears that the child/youth will remain in custody for a period of time. As representative payee, FSD tracks each child/youth's benefits on a month-by-month, child-by-child basis. We do not "pool" these funds and benefits for one child/youth are never used for other purposes or for other youth. If a child/youth leaves foster care and their cost of care was less than their benefit amount, FSD refunds the excess funds to the caregiver (or youth depending on their age).

Family Services recommends the following adjustments to the language of the bill:

1. Operationally, the best way to achieve the goals in this bill is to implement an incremental approach to moving away from using these funds. For example, FSD has already done analysis of the impact of conserving funds (holding and not applying to the cost of care) for all beneficiaries aged 17 and above. Phasing in this change by including additional descending ages of the beneficiaries is one way to apply an incremental approach, but there are options we could consider. Adopting an incremental approach would allow us time to work out the procedures for this new way of managing benefits, and there are a lot of details to figure out, and would not create an overwhelming budget pressure, while still moving toward the goal.
2. As stated above, the two types of benefits have very different requirements, and we will not be able to use the same procedures for both as described in the language of the bill. For example, ABLE accounts are designed for use by SSI beneficiaries and are not available to those who receive survivors' benefits. For that reason, FSD will need two separate and distinct procedures for the different types of benefits. Our recommendation is for the language of the bill be less prescriptive as to how to enact this change but rather include language the moves us toward the goal while allowing that there are many details to be figured out and that a variety of approaches will be necessary.
3. We understand the desire to pursue an appeal when an application for benefits is denied. As stated above, our capacity to pursue new SSI claims is very limited. We have committed our limited resources to pursuing benefits for youth approaching 18. We would need additional staff to expand our initial applications to a broader pool. This is especially true if we are also required to pursue an appeal whenever there is a denial of benefits. The work of managing the ledgers and ongoing reporting requirements, not to mention the annual Social Security audit, is more than a full-time job for the current staff person. There is no capacity to add to the current staff the labor-intensive work of applying for new SSI benefits and then appealing denials, though we understand and acknowledge the importance of that work.

Interstate Compact for Juveniles (ICJ):

FSD supports adding language to the bill clarifying that nothing in the proposed legislation shall be construed as altering or interfering with the Interstate Compact for Juveniles (ICJ).

Human Trafficking:

FSD remains concerned about the statistically vulnerable population of young people this bill would serve if additional safeguards are not included in the legislation. While FSD supports consistent training on human trafficking, particularly for certifying entities serving youth, it is important to

recognize that human trafficking is a nuanced and complex issue that requires training from credible, experienced, and evidence-informed trainers.

FSD recommends including language in the bill requiring any certifying entity involved in this work to complete a human trafficking training every two years, that is vetted and approved by the Human Trafficking Workgroup, which is a multi-disciplinary team. FSD staff members in conjunction with other state experts hold trainings on an annual basis.

FSD also recommends adding language requiring certifying entities to provide human trafficking prevention education to designated youth, or that there be a referral to a provider that can provide this education. This would help ensure that youth are aware of the risks and warning signs of trafficking. Additionally, FSD recommends that screenings occur for youth designated as unaccompanied and homeless. These screenings would not need to occur at the time of the youth's initial intake or be completed with the youth present, but we recommend that they occur within 2 weeks of the youth being formally designated.

FSD also recommends that certifying entities have policies and procedures in place that outline how to identify, and respond to concerns of trafficking, including the mandated reporting requirement. [Program Instructions](#) were issued by the Office of Trafficking in Persons in 2024 and could provide a starting point for policy and procedure creation.

Lastly, as noted in a previous memo from FSD, it is recommended that the bill require anyone responsible for designating a youth as "unaccompanied and homeless" to verify that the youth is not a minor who left home without parental consent, has not been reported missing to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and is not listed in the FBI's National Crime Information Center Missing Person File. This measure aims to mitigate risks and ensure the safety of vulnerable youth. While FSD understands that these recommendations may create additional steps for certifying entities seeking to certify a youth as unaccompanied, the population this bill intends to serve faces a significantly elevated risk of trafficking. Addressing potential vulnerabilities and unintended consequences within the proposed legislation is therefore critical to ensuring a youth's safety and well-being.

Transportation, Restraints, and Seclusion:

This bill seeks to put into law restrictions on the tools service providers have to ensure care environments remain safe. Much of what is included here is already in the regulatory standard and aligned with the values by which FSD operates. FSD appreciates the time and efforts of committee members to mitigate individually identified concerns throughout the bill.

Tyler Allen, High-End System of Care Director, corresponded with Representative Donahue on 03/10/2026, outlining his thoughts on several of the points presented via email. While we absolutely support the intent behind ensuring every level of protection is in place to provide for the safety of youth in care, we remain concerned that the approach of the bill may have wide ranging implications on the management of the Department's system of care that deserves careful consideration.

Depending on the final language submitted in the bill, we respectfully request a brief period to review it thoroughly.

We appreciate your dedication to this matter and your commitment to ensuring the best outcomes for Vermont's children and youth. Thank you for considering our input, and we look forward to continuing our collaborative efforts.

Aryka Radke