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To: Chair Lyons and Members of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee
From: Deanna Hartog, Poverty Law Fellow, Vermont Legal Aid
Date: April 15, 2026
Re: Strong Support for H.657 – Please Maintain the Full Bill Package

Dear Chair Lyons and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of Vermont Legal Aid, we write to express our strong support for H.657 as passed by the House and to urge you to maintain the full bill package as it moves forward. H.657 represents a comprehensive and thoughtful approach to promoting safety, stability, and long-term success for youth and young adults who have experienced foster care or homelessness. The bill's strength lies in how its provisions work together to remove structural barriers that perpetuate poverty and instability. We strongly oppose efforts to weaken or separate its components.

We particularly want to lift up two critical provisions: ensuring that foster youth can access and retain their Social Security benefits and eliminating the Reach Up asset limit. These reforms are essential to promoting independence, financial security, and economic justice for youth who are already navigating significant systemic disadvantages.

For youth in foster care, Social Security benefits – whether SSI or RSDI – are often among the only financial resources available to them. Too often, these benefits have been used to offset state costs rather than preserved for the child, to stabilize their financial future. The provisions in H.657 that require the Department to act in the child's best interests, conserve benefits when appropriate, and ensure transparency and accountability are a long-overdue step toward equity. Allowing youth to retain and build these benefits recognizes that they are entitled to the same opportunity to save, plan, and build stability as their peers. For foster youth and young adults transitioning out of care, even modest savings can insulate against a crisis.

Likewise, the elimination of the Reach Up asset limit is a crucial reform that aligns public policy with real-world economic realities. Asset limits punish families and young people for doing exactly what we encourage: saving money, building an emergency cushion, and planning for the future. Removing the asset limit is a clear acknowledgement that financial security is built through assets, not just income, and that public benefits should support, not undermine, long-term self-sufficiency. Removing assets from consideration would also simplify eligibility reviews and lower administrative costs, as Department staff would no longer have to verify resources and screen for complicated exclusions.

Together, these provisions advance economic justice by dismantling policies that keep foster youth and low-income families trapped in cycles of scarcity. Just as importantly, they are a form of harm prevention. Youth who exit foster care face disproportionately high rates of housing instability and homelessness in adulthood. Policies that allow young people to retain their Social Security benefits and build savings directly reduce these risks by giving youth the tools to secure housing, pursue education, and withstand financial emergencies.

We strongly support H.657 in its entirety and urge you to advance the bill without removing or weakening key components. Vermont has the opportunity to lead with a policy framework that promotes dignity, independence, and long-term stability for foster youth and vulnerable young people. We ask you to seize that opportunity.

Thank you for your consideration and for your continued commitment to the well-being of Vermont's youth and families.