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Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson

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<https://mn.gov/oofy/>

AT A GLANCE

- Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson (OOFY) is available to serve any of the 12,000+ current or recent Minnesota foster youth.
- The first Ombudsperson was hired in October 2023, OOFY hired an additional 3 staff in 2024.
- 50 people have contacted OOFY within approximately 3 months of opening.

PURPOSE

The Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson (OOFY) was created during the 2022 legislative session through advocacy of people with lived experience in foster care. OOFY is a neutral and independent agency whose purpose is to promote the highest attainable standards of competence, efficiency, and justice for foster youth. OOFY hears from foster youth around the state and seeks to elevate their concerns and work towards resolution. If appropriate, OOFY may choose to conduct investigations, write reports to the Governor or legislature, or make recommendations for both individual and systems-level change. In alignment with the One Minnesota Plan (<https://mn.gov/mmb-stat/one-mn-plan/One-MN-Plan-Building-Blocks.pdf>), OOFY has spent their first months engaging with stakeholders to ensure clear understanding of OOFY's mandate and approach and prevent duplication of roles.

Since the Ombudsperson's hiring in October of 2023, the agency has:

1. Hired three staff, for a total of four full-time employees.
2. Made progress on setting up infrastructure, including data collection system, website, and office.
3. Begun to hold meetings with their Advisory Board.
4. Conducted outreach with foster youth in different settings, county and state agencies, community organizations, and other stakeholders.
5. Opened to take requests for assistance from foster youth and their supporters.

BUDGET

As a newly established office, OOFY does not have detailed historical spending. OOFY has a general fund appropriation base of \$759 thousand in fiscal year 2025 and beyond. For the first fiscal year, OOFY's funds have primarily been spent on staff compensation and infrastructure set-up, with some funds being used for training and community engagement opportunities.

STRATEGIES

The Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson promotes the highest attainable standards of competence, efficiency, and justice for foster youth through the following strategies:

- **Receiving, Investigating, and Resolving Complaints:** Provides an impartial and unbiased process for foster youth to share concerns about facilities, foster homes, agencies, people, actions, or policies and have them investigated.
- **Providing Oversight and Closing Gaps:** Minnesota's foster care system is county-run and it can be difficult for young people to identify the right avenues to escalate concerns. OOFY may bridge communication between foster youth, local agencies, and/or the Department of Human Services or the Department of Children, Youth, and Families so that all foster youth have access to a high-quality care.
- **Promoting Competence, Efficiency, and Justice:** The Ombudsperson independently draws conclusions, examines existing policies and procedures, identifies opportunities for raising overall

standards, makes recommendations, and produces reports aimed at improving the foster care system.

- **Providing Information:** OOFY provides engagement, education, and information to foster youth, their loved ones, child welfare staff, and the community.
- **Promoting Equity:** People of color and LGBTQ2S+ youth are disproportionately represented in our foster care system. Addressing both individual and systemic concerns advances equity and provides for greater accountability and transparency in improving inequitable systems.

RESULTS

A central focus for OOFY is receiving, investigating, and resolving complaints from foster youth and others. Complaints may require various levels of resolution, ranging from referral to investigation. OOFY is able to support systems-level improvements through publication of research and reports, informed through our direct outreach and engagement with foster youth.

Measure name	Measure type	Measure data source	Historical trend	Most recent data
Number of total people contacting OOFY ¹	Quantity	OOFY Database	N/A	50
Number of foster youth contacting OOFY	Quantity	OOFY Database	N/A	7
Number of concerns that are Level 1 (low intensity)	Quantity	OOFY Database	N/A	10
Number of concerns that are Level 2 (middle intensity)	Quantity	OOFY Database	N/A	11
Number of concerns that are Level 3 (high intensity)	Quantity	OOFY Database	N/A	2
Cases resolved within 60 days	Quality	OOFY Database	N/A	N/A
Number of counties represented	Quantity	OOFY Database	N/A	13
Publications (research and reports)	Result	OOFY Website	N/A	N/A

Minnesota Laws 2022, Chapter 63 (<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/2022/0/Session+Law/Chapter/63/>) established the Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson.

¹ Contacts may be classified as Level 1, 2, or 3, General Inquiry (unrelated to a specific concern), or determined outside of the scope of OOFY and referred elsewhere.

(Dollars in Thousands)

	Actual FY22	Actual FY23	Actual FY24	Estimate FY25	Forecast Base FY26 FY27		Governor's Recommendation FY26 FY27	
<u>Expenditures by Fund</u>								
1000 - General			314	1,287	759	759	772	785
Total			314	1,287	759	759	772	785
Biennial Change				1,601		(83)		(44)
Biennial % Change						(5)		(3)
Governor's Change from Base								39
Governor's % Change from Base								3

Expenditures by Program

Foster Youth Ombudsperson			314	1,287	759	759	772	785
Total			314	1,287	759	759	772	785

Expenditures by Category

Compensation			172	503	515	531	528	557
Operating Expenses			142	784	244	228	244	228
Total			314	1,287	759	759	772	785

Full-Time Equivalents

			1.25	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
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(Dollars in Thousands)

	Actual FY22	Actual FY23	Actual FY24	Estimate FY25	Forecast Base FY26 FY27		Governor's Recommendation FY26 FY27	
1000 - General								
Balance Forward In				528				
Direct Appropriation		775	842	759	759	759	772	785
Cancellations		775						
Balance Forward Out			528					
Expenditures			314	1,287	759	759	772	785
Biennial Change in Expenditures				1,601		(83)		(44)
Biennial % Change in Expenditures						(5)		(3)
Governor's Change from Base								39
Governor's % Change from Base								3
Full-Time Equivalents			1.25	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00

(Dollars in Thousands)

	FY25	FY26	FY27	Biennium 2026-27
Direct				
Fund: 1000 - General				
FY2025 Appropriations	759	759	759	1,518
Forecast Base	759	759	759	1,518
Change Items				
Operating Adjustment		13	26	39
Total Governor's Recommendations	759	772	785	1,557

Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson

FY 2026-27 Biennial Budget Change Item

Change Item Title: Operating Adjustment

Fiscal Impact (\$000s)	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
General Fund				
Expenditures	13	26	26	26
Revenues	0	0	0	0
Other Funds				
Expenditures	0	0	0	0
Revenues	0	0	0	0
Net Fiscal Impact = (Expenditures – Revenues)	13	26	26	26
FTEs	0	0	0	0

Recommendation:

The Governor recommends additional funding of \$13 thousand in FY 2026 and \$26 thousand in each subsequent year from the general fund to help address operating cost increases at the Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson.

Rationale/Background:

The cost of operations rises each year due to increases in employer-paid health care contributions, FICA and Medicare, along with other salary and compensation-related costs. Other operating costs, like rent and lease, fuel and utilities, and IT and legal services also grow. This cost growth puts pressure on agency operating budgets that remain flat year to year.

Agencies face challenging decisions to manage these rising costs within existing budgets, while maintaining the services Minnesotans expect. From year to year, agencies find ways to become more efficient with existing resources. For FY 2026-27, agencies will need to continue to find additional efficiencies and leverage management tools to help address budget pressures. Holding open vacancies in certain programs or delaying hiring in other programs are examples of ways agencies manage through constrained operating budgets. Such decisions are difficult and must be weighed against a program’s ability to conduct business with less staffing and its impact to service delivery.

This recommendation provides additional resources to help address these cost pressures and pay for agency operations.

Proposal:

The Governor recommends increasing agency operating budgets to support current services. For the Foster Youth Ombudsperson, this funding will help cover expected growth in employee compensation and insurance, rising rents, IT services, and other operating costs.

Dollars in Thousands

Net Impact by Fund	FY 26	FY 27	FY 26-27	FY 28	FY 29	FY 28-29
General Fund	13	26	39	26	26	52
Total All Funds	13	26	39	26	26	52

Results:

This recommendation is intended to help the Foster Youth Ombudsperson address rising cost pressures and mitigate impacts to current levels of service and information to the public.