

February 25th, 2025

Chairman Irwin and Members of the Committee,

I am deeply honored to present written testimony before you today in support of Senate Bill 18, and I begin with heartfelt gratitude for the opportunity to address you.

Right now, Michigan children in foster care who are entitled to critical benefits—Social Security survivor benefits, Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits, pensions, and more—are having these funds quietly diverted by the government. This happens without notice, without consent, and without any avenue for recourse. For me, this isn't just a policy failure—it's a personal wound that has shaped my life and echoes in the struggles of countless others.

When I was 13, my father succumbed to an unrelenting form of cancer. My mother, trapped by addiction, could no longer care for us, and soon my four siblings and I were placed in foster care. What we didn't know—what no one bothered to tell us—was that the Social Security survivor benefits meant to sustain us were being intercepted by the state, which silently appointed itself as our representative payee.

It wasn't just Social Security, either; for families like mine, it could have been VA benefits from a parent's service or a pension earned through years of hard work. For me alone, the loss totaled over \$18,000—money that slipped away without explanation, leaving us none the wiser until I dug into the truth myself.

Picture what those resources could have done for us. That \$18,000—whether from Social Security, a VA benefit, or a pension—could have paid for tutoring to bridge the gaps in my education after years of upheaval. It could have covered college applications and books, opening doors to higher education, and a first car. It might have secured stable housing for my siblings and me as we faced aging out of foster care or funded counseling to mend the scars of loss and trauma.

This is why I implore you to support Senate Bill 18. This bill is more than a technical fix; it's a lifeline for foster youth entitled to Social Security, VA benefits, pensions, and other resources rightfully theirs. These funds aren't mere numbers—they're tools for education, stability, and recovery. By passing this legislation, you can ensure that no other child in foster care suffers the silent theft my siblings and I endured. You can guarantee that these benefits—earned through a parent's sacrifice, service, or labor—are used to empower young people toward brighter futures, not swallowed by an unaccountable system.

I am hopeful that, together, we can correct this wrong and uplift a generation of foster youth who have already lost so much.

Sincerely,

Justin Kasieta