

**Testimony to the Committee on Human Services
In Support of Bill 19-803, The Foster Youth Rights Amendment Act of 2012**

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Good afternoon Chairman Graham and members of the Committee. My name is Dwanna Lee, and I am the Policy Director at the Young Women's Project, a local nonprofit that works with youth to strengthen their rights and opportunities in government institutions.

I would like to start by thanking the Chairman and the Committee for scheduling this hearing. The summer months provide a unique opportunity for youth to participate in the political process by being present and testifying at Council hearings, since they are not in school. I would also like to thank Councilmember Alexander for introducing this important piece of legislation and her staff, specifically Terrance Norflis, who has devoted many hours to this work.

As you have heard today, many youth in foster care are unaware of the rights afforded them. Currently, rights available to foster youth are scattered throughout the DCMR, federal law, and CFSA internal policies. There is no document that contains all of the rights that youth in foster homes, group homes, and independent living programs (ILPs) are entitled, which presents a challenge to both youth and adults. Locating the rights in one place will not only serve as an advocacy tool for youth, but also an educational tool for caregivers, social workers, and other individuals that work on behalf of youth in foster care, who may also be unaware of the rights afforded these young people. That's why it is so important that this bill not only requires CFSA to inform youth and provide them with copies of their rights, but also to incorporate rights available to foster youth in trainings to staff and other affected partners. To ensure that youth have a thorough understanding of their rights, they should receive this information on an annual basis, instead of just once when they enter the system.

But knowledge alone provides little comfort without a system that cannot only address youth complaints, but administer penalties for rights violations and remedies to youth whose rights have been violated. Although Chapters, 62 and 63 of 29 DCMR each contain a section on penalties, it is difficult to determine what those penalties are, and there is no mechanism to provide a remedy to the youth. A clear system with specific penalties and remedies for rights violations will hold providers accountable and give youth an understanding of what they are entitled to if their rights have been violated. Foster youth are held responsible for specific standards and tasks while in care and understand the consequences of noncompliance. The same standard should apply to foster care providers.

This bill also requires CFSA to conduct an analysis on increasing stipend and allowance levels to foster youth in group homes and ILPs, which have gone unchanged since the regulations were enacted in 2001. Throughout that time the cost of living has continued to increase although youth are still

expected to care for themselves with the same amount of money. It is time for the city to commit to properly addressing an issue that continues to leave many of our youth in poverty.

Throughout the current legislative session, the Council has continued to demonstrate its commitment to foster youth. The passage of this bill would maintain that commitment by illustrating that the city's foster youth are a vital and important part of our community. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.