



**Testimony to the Committee on the Human Services
For the Oversight Hearing on Child and Family Services Agency**

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Good afternoon Chairman Graham, members of the Committee on Human Services and Council Staff. My name is Jan Holland-Chatman. I am a DC resident and a member of the District of Columbia Bar. Just recently, I joined the staff of the Young Women's Project, where, as the Senior Manager for Youth Advocacy and Organizing, I work closely with older youth who are in the child welfare system. I would like to share my concerns with you regarding some of the financial issues our youth are facing, as well as some of the deficiencies of the "aging out" process.

To share insight into my experience, from 1994 until 1998, I served the District as an attorney with the Family Division of the Office of the Corporation Counsel, which is now the Attorney General's Office. As a Family Division attorney, I, along with my co-workers, worked hard to win each case because we knew that children's lives were at stake. It was extremely important to me that the young children at the center of my cases were kept safe from abuse, and that they were protected from harmful, neglectful circumstances. If a child was being abused or neglected, it was my job to petition the matter in Court so the Government could step into these family's lives and provide the "proper parental care and control" that the parents could not. If I didn't file a petition and the children were left to be neglected, I wasn't doing my job.

That was 13 years ago. My reality now is that the names may have changed but the circumstances look hauntingly familiar. Now the children are in the child welfare system and

many of them still lack the resources that they need not to *thrive*, but just to survive day to day. I am also seeing older youth who are aging out of the system into despair and uncertainty – – and I am wondering how it is that in too many cases, I am watching the neglect play out from the other side. It's painful.

As a Family Division attorney, I could have petitioned a matter, and in severe cases, removed a child from a home, if there was improper care, consistently not enough food, or appropriate clothing wasn't being provided. Having the Government step in was "the answer". Now, when a youth comes to me with clothes that don't fit her pregnant belly, and mice eating the bread in her apartment so she can't use it – not at her mother's home, but in her CFSA contracted apartment unit, where is my answer? Or when youth consistently have to ask for money to get home, or for food, because their allowances ran out mid month - I find that what in the past was my "solution" is now the problem. We may not have given birth to them, but they are all our children – if we view them through this lens, we will treat them with the same care that we provide to our own.

To address some of the need, I recommend that we revisit the monthly stipend and weekly allowance provisions in the regulations and specify base figures or percentage requirements in future contracts for ILPs, group homes and foster homes. Yes, I do understand that we are in a "recession" – but as providers re-assess their budgets and determine where cuts will be made, we need to make sure that the cuts are not all borne by already financially strapped youth. Moreover, I would recommend re-evaluating the resident's allowance figures that were set for ILPs back in 2001 to adjust for increases in costs of living and transportation. With regard to transportation and clothing, I recommend that CFSA investigate the feasibility of strengthening partnerships with WMATA for free fare cards and TARGET or TJ Maxx for clothing allowances, a convenient answer since a new location of this retail chain is opening at the Rhode Island Avenue Metro station.

I am also extremely frustrated that all of the hard work that was put in ON THE FRONT END of all of those cases by the judges, attorneys, social workers, police detectives, and others has NO equivalent BACK END EXIT STRATEGY designed to ensure that youth who came into the system successfully LAUNCH UPWARD upon exiting. At this juncture, I am concerned that no one person, or no one specific entity, is accountable for ensuring that each youth has a successful exit strategy in place, and that there is thoughtful, concrete planning for their futures that goes beyond OYE meetings that occur once per month. How could we step into a child's life with a goal of improving their circumstances, and then, on the back end - let so many of them drop off the CFSA rolls by aging out into an abyss of uncertainty? While I was glad to hear about Taesha and Shameka's success stories at CFSA's Life After Foster Care forum – these youth made it very clear that they succeeded because they were tenaciously advocating for what they needed. What happens to the quiet ones?

Councilman, I strongly urge you to consider facilitating the Youth Transition Center approach that YWP is advocating for – a “one stop”, accountability driven, results oriented, entity – accountable to but apart from CFSA - designed with and by the youth who are experiencing these issues every day. The approach might also use inter-agency strategies that include partnerships with DOES, DCPS, OSSE, and reporting to the Deputy Mayor. I have heard from youth who have tried the previous CFSA/OYE model and walked away from the experience disillusioned, with their dreams dashed, without a solid plan for their futures, and without a basic resume, much less prepared for a job interview. These youth don't need a quick Band-Aid, they need a real “transition center” that provides a long-term solution.

Thank you for hearing my testimony.
