

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

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Good afternoon Councilmember Graham and other Council Members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kianni Jones and I am 23 years old. I was in foster care for five years and I aged out on September 9, 2011. I worked at the Young Women's Project for almost three years as a member of the Foster Care Campaign Staff. My main focus right now is to finish my associate's degree and find a job that can pay for school and my living expenses.

I am here today to share my experience during the two years after aging out of care and to make recommendations for programs that should be included in the budget for next year. When I aged out of care on September 9th, 2011, I didn't have the resources needed to successfully transition out into the real world. Having additional support for employment, housing, and transportation during this first critical year out of care would have been made life less hectic and more manageable. With additional supports my entrance into the "real world" would have been less stressful.

Transportation The first year that I aged out of care I got a job at Macy's in Arlington, Virginia. I traveled from my home in Congress Heights five to six days a week. I was paying more than \$250 a month to get to and from work. My transportation costs were about 30 percent of my monthly pay. That first year out of care I also worked at Target. I worked at three different locations: Largo, Maryland; Columbia Heights; and Falls Church, Virginia. In order to get to Largo and Falls Church I spent \$280 a month. To get to the Columbia Heights location I was spending more than \$200 a month. I was unable to save money for school and I could not pay down my debts. I was also unable to afford to get my own apartment. I ended up having to leave those jobs to find another position closer to home.

Housing I live with my foster father. This is where I have been since I aged out three and a half years ago. During the transition process I worked with my Colloborative worker to find housing. She gave me a list of housing options that accepted vouchers and we went on tours of apartments and houses. I found a few places but I had to pay application fees, security deposits and had to undergo credit checks. This was all a problem because I didn't have the money to pay the fees and the Rapid Housing voucher only goes toward rent. Aside from the escrow account that was set aside for me when I aged out I had no other savings. That money of course didn't last very long. I went to the OYE staff for assistance with the

fees but I was given the run around and ultimately the fees were not paid. I also realized that the Rapid Housing voucher was a onetime voucher and if I got an apartment or house and I might have to move when the year was up. It didn't make sense to move into an apartment when after a year I still might not be in a position to cover all of my rent. I realized that getting my own place was not the best option at the time. The most reasonable and affordable option was to stay with my foster father who was able to receive the Rapid Housing voucher. I was fortunate because I did have my foster father to live with but it would have really helped if I had other options. Some youth are not in foster homes at the time of emancipation so they have even more limited options. I am thankful for the Rapid Housing funds I received. I received between \$300 and \$400 a month. Without that support, I would have been in a shelter home, or possibly homeless.

Employment Finding employment especially when I was foster care was very difficult. The jobs that I manage to get only covered just a fraction of my living expenses. As I stated before I worked at Macy's and Target the year after emancipation but these are not career track jobs. They are retail jobs and they do not pay very much nor do they have real potential for advancement. At Macy's I was paid \$7.50/hour and at Target I was paid \$8.00/hour. I would have loved to have an entry level job in graphic design or information technology. It would have been great to get vocational training or an internship while I was still in care and then I would have qualified for more career centered and higher paid positions.

I am still struggling to stay afloat. I'm barely making it through each month. I am focused on looking for full-time employment and finishing school. Being trans-gender has makes finding and maintaining a job even more difficult. My goal in life was to always successful and independent. I have huge potential with a strong bright future ahead of me.

Recommendations:

To better assist youth who are aging out we have the following budget recommendations for CFSA:

- 1) **Transportation:** Youth who age out should be eligible to receive transportation assistance until their 22nd birthday. Youth would have an additional year to participate in the current foster youth transit subsidy program. We propose that they receive the funds directly from the Office of Youth Empowerment. Please *allocate \$108,432 to extend the transportation subsidy program for one year (for 114 emancipating youth during their 21st year) to provide additional support for traveling to work, school (including GED programs), vocational /job training and for job searching.*
- 2) **Employment:** Any youth who at the time of emancipation are participating in an employment or vocational training program will be eligible to receive a stipend until the age of twenty-two.

- 3) **Housing:** Housing is one of the biggest obstacles for youth leaving care and there should be additional options. **Rapid Housing** funds, in addition to being available for qualifying landlords and foster parents should be available for an expanded category of recipients. These housing funds should also be made available for youth who are in school full time and are not employed. *Please set aside \$560,000 in Rapid Housing Funds to cover youth aging out for one year with the \$5,000 stipend to put toward housing in an apartment, with a family member or foster parent.* The employment requirement for this benefit should be removed so that youth who most need this benefit can be included.

Thank you for your time and attention. You have been a good friend and fierce advocate for youth in care. We will truly miss you and hope that you will be back some day.