

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

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Hello everyone my name is Mary Hicks-Pope. It's an honor to come before you today. I am 19 years old and I work with YWP and OYE Youth Ambassadors. Currently I live at the Latin American Youth Center Teen Bridge Program, a group home in Columbia Heights. I would like to share with you some of my experiences in care before I was adopted in 2003 and when I reentered care in 2009. I was never able to live with my birth mother and father because of their drug habits. When I was 2 years old my aunt took me and my newborn brother into her care. At the age of five my father passed away, I attended the funeral but it wasn't a good experience. Living with my aunt gave me mostly bad memories but I love her with my whole heart to this day. I got beat a lot by her boyfriend and he would put me out the house a lot but they are the ones I called mommy and daddy.

Issue #1: Youth Placement and the foster care experience: Two years after my father died my brother and I were taken away from my aunt and placed in care. When I moved into my first foster home I was scared. I didn't know these people and I didn't want to know them. I cried a lot my first night but I had to suck it up because I knew I had to be strong for my brother. Every night he would ask when we were going home. I told him I didn't know. The foster parent had plenty of sons who enjoyed touching me. I told no one, I no longer cared about myself. I don't remember how long that placement lasted but I do know it wasn't too long.

My next placement was with the Craigs family whom I could never forget. They treated me as if I was their own. They had older kids and a young daughter with whom I shared rooms with. I had a great time and didn't want to move back home but then we were moved again. I was confused and hurt I was tired of moving.

The last foster home was with the Hayes family. I hated it there. I had a room that was as small as the room in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone movie. The foster mother had a son whom would take my toys and make me do inappropriate things to get them back. Most of the time they would dress me up like a boy and I would play rough sports because I was the only girl.

When I was ten we moved back with family. We moved in with my new adopted mother, it was great living with her until she married my stepfather. He used to beat me too. I didn't like him and started fighting back. At

that time I was 15. I was tired of his abuse and his beer drinking. My mother on the other hand was tired of me. She was getting sick and was in the hospital a lot. I came out and labeled myself as a lesbian and I began to smoke marijuana and drinking liquor. She could no longer take the stress I was causing. I tried running away but I would always have to return.

At the age of sixteen I was placed back in the foster care system. In my first foster home upon return I had to break into my house more than once and had a food fight with the foster mother. I was put out one night at 11:30 pm and had to catch the train from shady grove to CFSA. That night I had to call the police on myself because the train had stopped running.

My first group home was okay but I was kicked out when I lost my temper in a meeting with a social worker, GAL and therapist. I was frustrated with my social worker and GAL for not helping me. I was locked up for this incident.

The second group home I was placed in was the worst. The owner of Saga Adventures was very disrespectful and mean to all the girls. I remember when he told me I was a want-to-be boy and that he was going to make the rest of my childhood miserable. The staff was also disrespectful and not to be trusted. I was going through a lot of emotional breakdowns because I was too stressed in the house. During this time my social worker was not supportive. I called her 13 times in a row and never got a call back. Sometimes I skipped school to go to CFSA and wait for my social worker to get to work. After asking many times I was finally moved out of the house due to my room being destroyed by staff. They wrote in their paperwork that they found a gun and marijuana but really it was a cap gun and tobacco.

That's when I moved into my second foster home back in the system. My longest placement, and out of them all the best, was in Clinton Maryland. My problem was their location. There were many nights where I would sit at the station and wait just about an hour before they came to pick me up. I was attending night school and sometimes they forgot about me. I was the only person left outside, sometimes in the rain and snow waiting for them. The thing that made me the most uncomfortable was when I needed clothes for an interview. She told me that she didn't feel comfortable buying me boy clothes and that I should try to find something in Dress Barn. I was hurt and didn't want to ask for anything else.

My third foster home was unacceptable. I made it very clear to my agency that I didn't want to live with Christian families because I know how they can be. The foster mother told me she didn't want me talking to anyone in the house alone because i was a lesbian... She also told me she was going to try to change me.

The house was overcrowded with people and dogs and the home was not big at all. The house had a horrible odor that even my old social worker said was nasty. When I asked to move they said I had to stay because they had no more placements available.

I then was placed in a temporary foster home and had to sleep on a couch for a month. I was then moved back out to Clinton in a foster home with all men. I stayed there for a week before I was moved into my present group home.

Issue 2: Education I was a straight A student from elementary to junior high school, I was with National Honor Society, peer mediation and best friends foundation. I got a lot of awards. I was in the choir and was in the youth court with 3rd district police department. When I came back into the system I was still attending Bell Multicultural High School, the last grade I completed was the 11th before I dropped out. I used to love school but at that point it went away. I tried to go to school but I couldn't. They had me on Seroquel and I would fall asleep on the school bus or as soon as I got into class. I got put out of Bell and went to Dunbar and then I went to Crossland. I had a 4.0 at Crossland night school. I went to Surrattsville in MD where everyone was very supportive. My mother died and I stopped going. I came back to DC and started going to Roosevelt STAY and it was good except I wasn't learning anything. I decided to take the GED practice test. I passed it so I applied for the GED and I was approved.

Issue #3: Social Workers: I had four social workers since I've been in care. One was terrible and I could not reach her. One was very sweet. One was okay but she was a dangerous driver. At one point, there were too many people on my case – a social worker, a GAL, a medicine lady, a therapist – my life was devoted to CFSA meetings. I had to change my phone number so people would stop calling me. The best social worker I have received with OYE. She is very helpful and does her job well. If I can't reach her I am able to talk to anyone at OYE. OYE is very supportive you just have to know who to talk to.

Issue #4: Group Home Staffing Concerns: My current group home is ok but I still have a lot of problems here. Some times staff doesn't do their job the appropriate way but when I do something I get a fine and a contract to sign. Only six girls can live in my house yet we have close to 20 staff working in our home all together different shifts. We don't know who we are going to see sometimes. The staff treat the house like it's their home and we are visitors. If we are watching TV in the basement and they are about to have a meeting

they ask us to excuse our selves. I know that foster care isn't a punishment for us but why are we treated like it is? Why should we have to live places we are not comfortable? I'm comfortable alone I can concentrate and focus more when I'm by myself. I get stressed, depressed, and angry living in these homes with other people. I have people who try to harm me mentally and physically; I have things stolen from me; and I have a lot of bad influences around me. I have cried many nights wishing things were different. Why do people take on the role of being a caretaker if they don't care? It's because they need the money and it's not a hard job if you know how to get away with some wrongs.

Issue #5: Youth Transition Planning: I will be 20 in June and I want to live in independent living but in order to do so I know I need a job and education. I passed my GED last week and I am working on college. I have one part time job for six hours a week at YWP and work as a Youth Ambassador with OYE where I get a stipend. I have been working with Phil Lartigue who runs the internship program at OYE and I have just started the United Planning Organization Next Steps Young Adult Empowerment Program. Hopefully within the next few months I should be able to move into Independent Living. I have a savings account that I opened for myself and I'm learning how to save. I recently received my food handler's license. I have a lot of dreams but I know that with the help I receive from OYE I can get closer to my goals. I know I have made a lot of mistakes in my life but I know everything happens for a reason.

Solutions: I have a couple suggestions for making the system better:

- 1 **Pop up home checks would make the system better.** CFSA staff should come into the group home as an ordinary person so they can observe during the day and night to see if staff is doing their job. Also have home checks every month for foster homes. Make sure they have a clean house and that everything is up to date. Another thing you could do is provide foster youth with tape recorders so we can keep record of the mistreatment.
- 2 **Match foster youth with the right group homes and foster homes.** Learn about the youth, ask them what do they like to do and what type of things or people they don't like. Make sure that the staffs at group homes show they care. These are suggestions that may already take place but are not being pushed. I've had some input in the past but it was ignored.

- 3 **Don't make youth take medicines they don't need.** So many youth in care are put on medicine because of their behavior or feelings. Half of the kids on care who are on medicine do not have the problems they are diagnosed with. It also gives youth an out – I am acting like this because I didn't take my medicine. Maybe it's the placement making them act out. I'm sure more youth have great ideas so ask around ask what makes a great placement. It's so many ways to make this work for youth who really want better homes. I know it's too late to change my life but I'm determined to make another life a little easier. I am diagnosed with depression. My depression comes from me being unhappy.

- 4 **OYE needs a hotline for older youth:** Older youth need a 24 hour phone line – someone we can talk to 24-7, someone to pick us up if something happens. Who do we call? I don't know. The group home told us --- don't call them because they are not going to pick us up if we are stranded or pay for a cab. We are trying to come home but they are telling us that they are not going to pay it so they are going to call the police on us and we are going to have a charge. That is not a way to teach us something. That is serious.

I'm thankful for the foster care system because all the hurt and pain I've experienced from it has made me stronger and more prepared for the real world. I appreciate you for having an open ear not only to hear my story but also being open to understanding it.