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

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Good afternoon Chairman Graham and members of the Human Services Committee. I am Nadia Gold-Moritz Executive Director of the Young Women's Project (YWP) -- a DC-based nonprofit organization that builds the leadership and power of DC youth so that they can lead campaigns to improve youth-serving institutions. The youth who you met here today are part of our Foster Care Campaign (FCC) which trains more than 30 foster youth leaders each year who work as advocates and organizers to improve the lives of their peers through advocacy, education, and policy work.

FCC's work is focused on the unmet needs of older youth – who make up about half of the youth in care population. As of January 31, 2013, according to CFSA data, there were 755 youth ages 13-20 (153 less than last year at this time). The majority of those youth (479 out of 755) are ages 17-20. During the period of October 2011 through August 2012, CFS reported 82 youth in Teen parent Programs with 96 dependents, 92 youth in ILP residential unit and main facilities, and 262 youth in group home and teen bridge facilities.

For the past three years, our youth have reported on a range of problems and challenges. Many of them are simple needs – transportation, clothing, and supplies, and inadequate stipend and allowance levels. We are pleased to report that in the past year – thanks to you and the leadership of Director Donald, we've made an enormous amount of progress in developing and moving policies that –once they are implemented – will have a huge positive impact on the lives of older youth in care. They include:

- ✓ **The Foster Youth Rights Amendment Act of 2012** will consolidate and expand existing youth rights, provide social worker training and youth outreach, and establish a mechanism for receiving and resolving complaints, and annual reporting.

- ✓ **The Foster Youth Employment Amendment Act of 2012** will provide a significant resource for hundreds of current and former foster youth seeking employment, and serve as a foundation for better programming and increased attention to the issue of foster youth employment.

- ✓ **The Foster Care Youth Transit Subsidy Program** will provide subsidized transportation to 19 and 20 year old foster youth, saving them hundreds of dollars a month and provide essential support needed to meet their educational and employment responsibilities.

- ✓ **Increased Stipends and Mandatory Allowance for all youth:** will establish mandatory allowances and raise stipends for youth in congregate care and foster homes. This program will go a long way to providing needed resources for clothing, transportation, and other essential supplies and an opportunity to save and manage money.

- ✓ *Youth Ombudsman*: Launched in February, the Ombudsman will receive and handle youth complaints on a range of youth issues and support youth in resolving disputes.

We would like to thank Director Donald for her willingness to make older youth a real priority, for engaging youth, focusing on institutional solutions that address youth's daily life problems while creating opportunities for independence and responsibility, and crafting that will mean real immediate changes for older youth in the system. We commend her on this work and are committed to a continued partnership. We would also like to thank you Chairman Graham for your solution-focused leadership as chair of this committee and Councilmember Yvette Alexander for introducing the Foster Youth Rights Amendment Act. Under your leadership, we've seen more progress for older youth in the past year than we have in the past ten. You've provided opportunity and hope to hundreds of youth.

Now that we have systems in place to address the basic needs of older youth, we need to turn our attention toward the more difficult and entrenched challenges of employment, education, and transitioning out of care. This is where I'd like to focus for the remainder of my testimony. But first a word on implementation….

The effectiveness of all of these important, potentially transformational initiatives will depend on implementation. In crafting that implementation, we encourage Director Donald and other CFSA staff, to think big. The problems our youth are experiencing happen every day and require systematic proactive solutions that engage their input, encourage them to act responsibly, and utilize all of the systems that they need to master to thrive in the outside world. The solutions are usually more cost effective (because we are not paying for meetings with social workers and meetings with OYE staff and rides from social workers and GALS and the time it takes to get a court order for transportation of clothing).

Transportation: Five months after the Foster Care Youth Transit Subsidy Program became law, most older youth do not yet have access to transportation and continue to miss school, work, and appointments because of it. As of January 2013, there are 374 youth placed in foster care between the ages of 18-20 and in need of this program,175 are placed in DC, 178 in Maryland, 10 in Virginia and 11 outside the Metrorail area. Youth who have graduated from high school and no longer qualify for the school subsidy are paying hundreds of dollars a month out of their small stipends. Youth who live in Maryland but go to DC schools are covered by the student transit pass but frequently stranded at border stations without the funds to get all the way home.

In the FY13 Budget Support Act, $85,307 was transferred from the agency to WMATA to fund a new Foster Care Youth Transit Subsidy Program. A new program was created by attaching the following language to the allow 19 and 20 year old foster youth to participate in the student transit subsidy program: Section 2(c)(4) of the School Transit Subsidy Act of 1978, effective March 3, 1979 (D.C. Law 2-152; D.C. Official Code § 44-217(c)(4)), was amended by striking the semicolon and inserting the phrase "and for youth in the District's foster care system until they reach 21 years of age;" in its place.

DDOT and CFSA staff started working on an implementation plan in August. In early February, DDOT's attorney determined that the BSA language was not consistent with the original law that that they could only approve transit subsidies for foster youth who were 19, living in the District, and attending a elementary or secondary public, parochial or private school in the District. These youth were already covered by the student transit subsidy program.

In response to this determination, in mid February, CFSA initiated an internal program that would reimburse youth for travel to work and school if they met with OYE staff, provided documentation. We are not sure how many youth have been reached through this program. Council Member Bowser plans to propose emergency legislation that fulfils the original intent of the BSA language changes – to allow DC foster youth between the ages of 18-20 living in DC, Maryland and Virginia – to use subsidized fare media for trips related to education, getting to work, and looking for work**.**

Recommendation: We strongly urge the development and passage of emergency legislation that restores the original intent of the FY2013 Budget Support Act language to provide subsidized transportation to youth in care until age 21. Upon passage of this legislation, we urge CFSA staff to *quickly* work with DDOT to develop and

implement a subsidy distribution plan that covers foster youth ages 19 and 20 and younger youth who attend DC schools but live in Maryland and are not covered fully by the DC student transit subsidy. The implementation should not burden youth with meetings and paper work to demonstrate eligibility.

Increasing Youth Stipends and Establishing a Mandatory Allowance: We strongly support Director Donald's plans to implement a new program that establishes allowances and raises stipends for youth in congregate care and, eventually, youth in foster homes. This program will go a long way to providing needed resources for clothing, transportation, and other essential supplies and an opportunity to save and manage money. Older youth will be less reliant on adult staff, social workers, and foster parents for daily essentials. This program will help to move youth along a continuum of responsibility and independence.

Recommendation for Allowance and Stipend Increase: Full speed ahead. As part of the implementation, we hope to see the following:

1. Provide a base allowance to youth regardless of placement. Youth change placements so often and youth in foster parent homes can be just as likely to need and not get basic supplies.
2. Reward positive youth behavior (good grades, enrichment program enrollment, positive home behavior)
3. Require youth to open savings accounts and to save part of their allowance each month.
4. Administer the allowances through direct deposit so that youth can receive the money on time and directly.
5. Ensure that parenting youth have adequate resources to support the healthy care and development of their children.

Employment: The vast majority of youth ages 18-20 remain unemployed. According to data provided by CFSA, as of January 31, 2013 there were 375 youth ages 18-20; 301 of them were unemployed; 19 were employed full time and 55 were employed part time. Only 32 of the 122, 20 year olds are currently employed which means – as they head out into the world soon – many of them will end up poor and homeless.

On the positive side, CFSA has taken meaningful steps to build employment programming and opportunities and is putting to good use the $1,000,000 that was allocated by this Committee in the FY2013 budget to support subsidized employment for young adults. CFSA hired a Supervisory Employment Specialist who has created a subsidized employment program including partnerships with several organizations. They've established partnerships with several organizations that are providing job readiness training and career specific training (including FAM Treats, United Planning Organization: Next Steps Program (NSP), Department of Employment

Services - Preparing Youth for Adulthood (PYAP), UDC's Workforce Development Program (WDP), Imageworks (IWC), Bennett Career Institute, and others. There are 44 youth currently engaged in vocational training and receiving $8.25 an hour for their training and more once they are placed in internships.

It would be helpful to understand the connections between the youth who were trained last year (100 completed vocational training) and the 129 youth who were employed. Other than food service (with 58 being trained and 48 being employed in this area), the connections were not clear. It would also be good to know whether youth are employed part time or full time and the wages that they earn.

Foster youth are not alone in their employment struggles. Youth unemployment in the District is at an all time high at 50 percent for 16-19 years olds - twice the national average, according to a report by the Brookings Institution. Most foster youth are facing significant barriers as they prepare to enter the workforce. Many of these youth have dropped out of school; are lacking in communication, problem solving, reading, writing, and other basic work-readiness skills; and are in need of basic supports (transportation, food, and clothing) that will enable them to participate in the workforce. Many of these youth have spent years in chaotic placements without positive exposure to the workforce or caring adults to guide their career exploration. In many cases, they have not developed the discipline, teamwork orientation or self-control to be functional in workplace settings.

Employment Recommendations: We are encouraged by the OYE employment program which seems to incorporate a number of best practice elements. Given the urgency of this issue, however, we have additional recommendations for expanding and deepening this program:

1. Provide intensive work readiness training that address the barriers mentioned above through training, peer support, and job coaches;
2. Link occupational training to specific fields and subsidized work experience that can lead to a permanent position; creating a pipeline that results in jobs and guarantees companies competent, skilled workers
3. Provide educational opportunities through complementary course work; encourage youth to complete their GEDs or diplomas
4. Provide support in financial management support and require youth to open bank accounts and save a percentage of their wages.
5. Providing ongoing, multilayered youth development training in independent living skills, physical and mental health services and training, financial literacy, computer literacy, healthy decision making, conflict management, and mentoring

Based on similar models around the country, a Foster Youth Work Pilot program could be implemented for 40 youth with a budget of $500,000 (including $300,000 going directly to youth stipends.) Eventually, this program could be expanded and run out of a community-based, one-stop Foster Youth Transition Center that also offers programming and support in education, life skills, health and wellness, and housing to youth ages15-25 and brings older youth service providers under one roof.

Education: The lack of educational progress among foster youth continues to be a significant barrier to their independence and successful transition. The numbers of youth progressing through and graduating from college indicate that CFSA is not making progress. Although foster youth high school graduation rates (about 40 percent) are similar to youth not in care, significantly fewer foster youth go onto college and graduate from college. As of January 31, 2013, there were 46 foster youth in college. In FY2012, there were 102 attending college full time but only 3 college graduates. About 14 percent of those attending make it to their senior year and 16 percent to their junior year. Although CFSA has made progress in paying tuition on time, systems for paying for books, transportation, and other non-tuition payments still need to be streamlined so that youth are not stuck with significant out of pocket expenses that take months to reimburse.

In May 2011, the Committee transferred $500,000 within the agency from Teen Services to the second year of the RFP for Youth Transitional Living Support and in September 2011, CFSA awarded contracts of $250,000 each to Sasha Bruce Youthworks for life skills training and Synergistic, Inc. for college prep services and job readiness-placement. We have not yet received information about the outcomes of these programs but based on the current college admissions and progress, it seems that the programs are having little impact.

On a high school level, there are several educational barriers that should be addressed immediately: When youth change placements – which happen very frequently for older youth – they change schools and usually lose 3 to 6 months of their education.[i] Some of our youth report changing schools several times in their high school years, which has prompted many to drop out. Group home rules and strict curfews often prohibit youth from taking part in after school activities. Further, most group homes and ILPs offer little educational support for youth residents (including working computers and access to the internet).

Educational Recommendations: We encourage CFSA to develop a comprehensive education plan that includes the following components:

1. Establish clear, progressive program goals for an education and for individual student advancement. Let students know you have high expectations for them.

2. Develop educational guidelines that emphasize getting youth into good schools and keeping them in the same school, regardless of placement changes. Build partnerships with high quality public and private schools that may be willing to reserve spots for foster youth.

3. Require group homes and ILP placements to provide adequate computers with internet access.

4. Encourage and reward youth for participating in after-school activities and enrichment programs.

5. Require all college eligible youth to enroll in college prep enrichment programs that provide intensive, weekly college prep training that focuses on college terminology, career exploration, application process, financial aid, scholarships, and preparations for campus life.

6. Provide strong educational advocacy that helps to identify youth needs and barriers and works to provide services to address them. This could include educational coaches, mentors, or peer support.

7. Revise current reimbursement practices for college students needing to purchase books and other educational supplies so that they are not forced to pay for supplies out of pocket.

8. Create an ongoing program to provide support for youth who are already in college to provide regular group checkins (by phone or in person) as well as logistical, financial, and academic support to youth in college.

Transitioning Youth Out of Care

For anyone working with older youth in care, this issue is the most harrowing. We watch as they shuttle from meeting to court hearing, referral to referral. We spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to fund the staff to support each youth and in the end – on the day they turn 21 – it all stops suddenly. They are plucked from the system and plopped down in a shelter with all of their belongings, without a job or a place to live, sometimes with a couple of kids in tow.

We have not seen any recent data on youth who age out of the system. We are not sure any has been collected. Based on the few local and national studies that have been done, the results are alarming. A 2010 DCAYA report found that 40 percent of homeless youth interviewed had a history of child welfare and/or juvenile justice system involvement. Most of the older youth we work with age out of the system without reliable family support, are not employed or are not making enough to afford housing, and do not have any other housing options.

In the past year, OYE has made progress in terms of the number, timeliness, and frequency of transition meetings being held. CFSA has increased funding for Aftercare Services and Rapid Housing. Although the meetings make everyone feel better, and show that OYE is doing something, we doubt that they make any real difference in the post-emancipation lives of youth. Successful transition begins years before the exit date and it's not about how many meetings you have. The best way to transition youth into stable economic conditions is to stabilize their economic conditions before they age out. This requires a comprehensive plan and hard work by the youth and the adult guides. It also requires a youth development model.

In 2011, the Committee raised a number of concerns about the quality and outcomes of the agency's programming for older youth and how the Office of Youth Empowerment was accounting for their then $5 million budget. Questions about OYE's organization, outcomes, and effectiveness remain as central to the survival of youth once they age out of the system. The services that CFSA has thrown at this problem—transition meetings, collaborative workers, referrals, rapid housing vouchers – are not working. We are spending millions and have not made progress in these areas.

Recommendations for transition: Establish a youth transition center that would serve as a hub for older youth programming, a source of continuing support for youth who aged out, and a model for the District about how to engage and support disconnected youth. There are many successful Transition Center models around the country that are making significant progress in these areas for foster youth. Many of them are run with budgets less than $2 million. Most of them involve collaboration between government agencies and community-based nonprofits – who can usually do this round-the-clock whatever-it-takes work cheaper and with better outcomes. This Center could pull together many of the older youth focused projects CFSA has already initiated along with more intensive, connected, comprehensive work that is done by a Center staff and community partners.