

**Testimony to the Committee on Human Services
On the Foster Youth Employment Amendment Act of 2012**

**Nadia Gold-Moritz, Executive Director
Young Women's Project**

March 26, 2012

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 multicultural 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 30 foster youth leaders each year to work as advocates and organizers in improving the lives of their peers through research, training, and policy. FCC's work is focused on the unmet needs of older youth -- who make up about half of the DC foster youth population.

I am here today to support the Foster Youth Employment Amendment Act of 2012. This Bill will provide a significant resource for the more than 1000 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. At the same time, many foster youth will need support and training to take advantage of this opportunity. Along with this important legislation, we encourage the Committee to support initiatives that help foster youth prepare for government positions through work readiness training, subsidized internships, and other supports that can help them work through the many employment barriers they face.

Between 150 - 200 youth age out of foster care each year. Most of these youth are at high risk for unemployment and homelessness. According to a study by CFSA in 2009, only 14 percent had the necessary resources to support themselves, 59 percent had insufficient funds to cover their living expenses, and 46 percent were unemployed. More recent data, provided by CFSA to the Committee on Human Services in February 2012, confirms that only 77 foster youth (out of about 450 eligible youth) are currently employed (YWP alone accounts for 16 of those jobs). Further, 46 youth (out of about 450 eligible youth) completed vocational programs in FY 2011. It is unclear how many of those found jobs in their field.

We realize that foster youth are not alone in their employment struggles; however, although the Washington Area economy has remained strong and regional unemployment is low, youth unemployment is at an all time high at 50

percent for 16 - 19 years olds - twice the national average. Further, 32 percent of low-income youth without college degrees are not working compared to 22 percent nationally (according to a report by the Brookings Institution).

Why the Foster Youth Employment Amendment Act is important

This Bill establishes foster youth employment as a central child welfare system priority and lays the groundwork for additional programming and community involvement in this area.

This Bill opens up real opportunities for foster youth and former foster youth who need jobs now and have the education and experience to compete for DC government jobs.

This Bill supports our most under resourced citizens - foster youth who are on their own at very young ages without family support. According to a study released this past year by the DC Alliance for Youth Advocates based on interviews with 390 homeless youth aged 12-24, 40 percent had a history of involvement with the child welfare and/or juvenile justice system (national estimates suggest that 15-25 percent of former foster care youth will experience homelessness).

This Bill creates an opportunity for career exploration and development in a stable and diverse industry. Government positions would provide stable, living wage employment to DC's most vulnerable residents. A 2007 study by the University of Chicago focused on foster youth in the Midwest found that the average earnings of a foster care youth during their first year after aging out was \$7,000.

This Bill will save the District money. Without opportunities for employment, many foster youth rely on public assistance and are incarcerated after aging out –which costs the city millions of dollars each year. Although DC does not keep data on youth aging out, a 2007 study by the University of Chicago focused on foster youth in the Midwest found that 68 percent of men and 46 percent of women are arrested within one year of aging out.

Helping foster youth overcome barriers to employment

The Foster Youth Employment Amendment Act gives youth a head start in completing for government jobs. But many youth need help getting to the starting line. Most foster youth are facing significant barriers as they prepare to enter the workforce. The majority of older 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 (like transportation, food, clothing) that will enable them to participate in the workforce. Further, 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, team work orientation, or self control to be functional in workplace settings. In order to take advantage of this bill, many foster youth would need additional resources to overcome the significant barriers to employment they face including:

- **Lack of quality employment training and programming.** Even though older youth comprise half of CFSA's population, the agency has done little to develop quality programming for older youth in the areas of development, education, and employment. Although the Office of Youth Empowerment has a \$5 million budget, the only in house employment support they provide is Ansell-Casey testing and six week certification programs for home health aides and food handlers.
- **Lack of employment experience.** The lack of employment experience can make youth feel self-conscious and prevent them from taking advantage of available employment opportunities. On the job training continues to be one of the most effective ways to develop a highly skilled workforce. By creating subsidized employment opportunities, youth will be able to gain practical work experience that they can include on their resume, develop relationships with career professionals who can serve as mentors and models of workplace behavior, and earn money to support themselves.
- **Access to transportation.** Transportation continues to be one of the biggest obstacles youth face in accessing employment opportunities. As you heard today, many youth in foster care cannot get to interviews, work, and other appointments and activities because they lack the resources to access public transportation. This is especially true for youth in foster care homes; many of which are isolated and require youth to travel long distances (with high fares) to work and school. Preliminary data collected by YWP through conversations with 30 youth indicate that this issue causes significant stress and missed

opportunities for youth in foster care, which is why we have proposed the expansion of the School Transit Subsidy Program to include youth in foster care between the ages of 19 and 21.

- **Education.** About 40 percent of DC foster youth graduate from high school and are eligible to enroll in college. Many of them do go onto college (53 did last year), but only 40 percent of those youth move onto their sophomore year and only 15 percent end up graduating. The 60 percent who do not graduate are greatly in need of supplemental educational resources and support. According to CFSA data compiled by the Office of Planning, Policy and Program Support in February 2012, only four youth received their GED in 2011, which indicates that youth are not getting the support they need.
- **Inadequate clothing and other supplies.** Many foster youth are living in poverty – especially those in group homes and ILPs –without adequate food, clothing, or other essential supplies. Youth report regular theft, not receiving regular meals, not having the resources to purchase basic essentials, and little-to-no access to computers to identify employment opportunities. The lack of resources becomes even more apparent when in the process of preparing for interviews, youth realize that they do not possess the appropriate clothing they would need to obtain and occupy professional positions. The current ILP stipend level (about \$6,000 a year) is well under the poverty line (\$10,800 for a single person household). Foster homes and group homes do not require a minimum level for youth allowance.

Linking the legislation to work readiness training and subsidized work

We would like to see this bill linked with a program that helps youth prepare for government positions and work through their employment barriers. The Young Women's Project is proposing a Foster Youth Employment Pilot (Pilot) that would recruit 40 youth ages 19-20 who would commit to a 15 month, 20-hour a week program. Guided by clear objectives and ambitious outcomes, the Pilot would provide: 1) Intensive work readiness training; 2) Occupational training tied to specific government employment fields and other high growth industries; 3) Paid internships and subsidized work that would allow youth to familiarize themselves with specific positions; and 4) Education that supports specific government career tracks. High growth industries and mainstay DC employers including government, allied health, financial and insurance, retail, hospitality, high tech manufacturing, social assistance, business services, and construction trades would be targeted.

All youth who successfully complete the program will have the opportunity to work over 800 hours, earn over \$8,000, and receive 150 hours of job-readiness and life skills training. Youth participants will receive support and resources in financial management, housing, and accessing health care. They will be required to complete their GED's or diplomas, open bank accounts, and save \$2,000 of their earnings. The Pilot would utilize the best practices in youth employment programming by:

- ✓ Defining a vision and strategy for targeting high growth industries - develop relationships with industry leaders; get commitments for jobs and internships from specific companies
- ✓ Creating a pipeline that results in jobs and guarantees companies competent, skilled workers
- ✓ Providing job shadowing and job coaches on worksites and involve employers in training
- ✓ Providing complementary course work at educational institutions
- ✓ Providing ongoing, multilayered youth development training in, independent living skills, physical and mental health services and training, financial literacy, computer literacy, healthy decision making and conflict management, mentoring

Developing and implementing this pilot would require the active participation of a working group of youth employment experts to develop a plan, design a program, raise matching grants from foundations, and oversee the Pilot budget and outcomes. Some of these partners could include Urban Alliance, Year Up, DC Advocates for Youth, Wider Opportunities for Women, Brookings, Latin American Youth Center, Sasha Bruce Youthworks, DC Fiscal Policy Institute, and the Department of Workforce Development and Life Long Learning at UDC-CC.

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 \$100,000 in-kind from SYEP). \$300,000 of the budget would go directly to youth stipends and could be administered by DOES. There are several sources of funding within CFSA that could be used to support a pilot program. CFSA receives \$1.3 million per year from the federal *Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP)*. These funds are directed to support youth transition from foster care to self-sufficiency by providing academic support, career exploration, vocational training and placement, life skills training, and helping youth prepare and enter post-secondary training and education. It's unclear how these funds are currently allocated. 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. These funds have not yet been allocated. Finally, the Community Collaboratives receive \$2 million to provide housing and employment referrals to 200 youth aging

out. Redirecting \$1 million of this funding to develop a pilot program for 100 of those youth with subsidized wages, intensive training, and job placement would be a much better use of these funds.

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 ages 15-25.

Engaging Community Partners

Successfully integrating foster youth into the work force is a community endeavor and responsibility. Youth cannot be successful without a larger community of nonprofits, employers, and others supporting their participation in the workforce. **The Foster Youth Employment Amendment Act of 2012 takes the first step in engaging the larger community in supporting the success and sustainability of foster youth.**

Delivering a high quality, effective youth employment Pilot requires collaboration with youth employment experts and service providers. It means bringing the best programs and the best minds together to set goals, map out a strategy, and implement programs. It requires a coordinated effort with known community groups who are willing to bring ideas and money to the table and roll up their sleeves for foster youth.

This kind of work is at odds with the current CFSA contracting and program development process, much of which is conducted out of the public view and without the informed, meaningful input of youth. We know money changes hands but we don't know who is getting it or why, what they are doing with it or what the results are. During the past 10 years, YWP has devoted a lot of our time and energy to trying to find out what services are actually provided to youth and what the outcomes are. As an organization that serves 50 foster youth a year – the resources available to them should not be a mystery to us or to our youth – most of whom have no idea what opportunities or supports are out there or what to expect from providers they are referred to. CFSA's current approach to providing older youth services is built around an RFP process that does not require outcomes or youth-focused results, where youth participation is controlled by social worker-only referrals, and where the promised range of youth participants (usually 1-250) makes effective program planning nearly impossible.

We are suggesting a different approach – to replace CFSA's older youth contracting process with a grant award process modeled after the one used by DC's Department of Health (DOH) in their work to improve health

outcomes for youth. Led by HAHSTA, this process identifies established community based organizations, brings them together around common goals, and funds coordinated program work. Last year Council Member David Catania and his staff engaged a group of young people from YWP to evaluate the work of these Department of Health funded groups to assess their effectiveness and youth involvement within these organizations and develop a set of report cards. We recommend that CFSA transition the older youth RFP process to a grant-making, partnership-building process that encourages the most effective organizations to be part of service delivery and engages youth as evaluators and decision makers instead of passive, uninformed service recipients.

Thank you for introducing this important legislation and taking leadership to provide more employment opportunities for foster youth. The Young Women's Project would be pleased to serve as a resource on these issues.