



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

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Greetings Chairman Graham and other Council Members. My name is Nashwa Elgadi and I am the program coordinator for the Foster Care Campaign at the Young Women's Project. I am here today to share with you my observations on the effectiveness of the aging out process and specifically the Youth Transition Plan meetings conducted by the Office of Youth Empowerment (OYE). In the 2010 Annual Progress and Services Report, OYE announced the overhaul of staff resources, service delivery, and restructuring of their caseload approach. The centerpiece of OYE's new strategy is the Youth Transition Planning process and the group conferencing model. According to OYE, YTP meetings are designed to include the youth and all significant persons involved in their lives, all coming together to develop a comprehensive plan geared towards preparing the youth for adulthood.

Over the past four months, I have worked with 10 foster youth who were preparing to age out within 3-12 months; none of whom had an appropriate emancipation plan when they started working for YWP in November. My charge was to do two things: 1) Support, train, coach our youth to advocate on their own behalf and 2) do everything in my power to ensure that our youth had jobs and housing when they aged out. Because YWP is not a social service agency – my job was to make sure other people (mainly OYE staff and CFSA social workers) were doing their jobs. As a result, I have spent dozens of hours in YTPs and Family-Team Meetings (FTM) advocating for these youth, I have sent over 100 e-mails and placed more than 60 phone calls in an effort to push forward the aging out process for these youth. This is what I've learned:

- Social workers lack focus, resources, and preparation. The social workers I've dealt with lacked information and resources on aging out. Their only role was to make referrals to the Rehabilitation Services Agency (RSA), the Community Collaboratives, or the Court social service workers. None of our youth have received services from any of these referrals so far.

- OYE is not equipped to address youth's critical needs: They lack real resources specifically for affordable housing and employment opportunities. They have no job bank. They have no housing data base. They have no job training or career counseling. They do require youth to take the Ansell Casey survey but –at least with our youth – the results were never shared or discussed. All roads lead to RSA or nursing assistant programs.

I want to take this opportunity to provide you with firsthand insight on the issues youth face to simply get their most basic necessities. I will also include my observations of YTPs through a list of examples that highlight the inefficiency of these meetings. All of the YTP meetings I attended were for members of YWP's youth staff. In order to protect their privacy, I will give them each an alias.

Donna is a nineteen-year-old teen mother who was living in an unsafe foster home in violation of 18 of the Chapter 60 regulations. Donna's two most immediate aging out goals were to be moved to a better living placement and to enroll in a 4-year university. In addressing Donna's foster home violations, I attended a 3-hour meeting, I sent 15 e-mails to the social worker and his supervisor, and placed 10 phone calls to advocate for Donna's removal from the foster home and for financial compensation while she remained under the care of her neglectful foster mother. Donna's foster mother was rarely around, she often left the home for 1-2 weeks at a time without ensuring that there was enough food, transportation accommodations, or baby supplies for Donna's daughter. It took three months for Donna's agency to move her to a new placement and Donna was only given money to cover the cost of her basic needs for a one-week time period.

During Donna's first YTP meeting last month, she expressed an interest in attending a culinary arts degree program and, with assistance from her GAL, she submitted an application for a private program. During her YTP, Donna was told to consider attending community college instead because the private programs are more expensive. When we asked for a list of the affordable programs in culinary arts, the educational specialist said that he does not keep a compiled list of programs and instead offered to help Donna conduct a Google search. Moreover, in order for Donna to move forward with her educational goal she was told to schedule two other meetings, one with the educational specialist and another with the vocational specialist to further discuss her career goals. One month later, after I have made 5 phone calls to OYE staff, in addition to sending 3 emails to

Donna's social worker, she has finally been able to schedule her two meetings. What is more frustrating is that these meetings are just the beginning of the process, Donna will only complete a vocational assessment and do an on-line search for degree programs during these first two meetings.

Jenny is twenty years old and only has 5 months left in the system. Jenny's two most immediate aging out goals are to secure housing and employment so she can be independent when she ages out. At the beginning of this month, I attended Jenny's first YTP meeting—scheduled 6 months before she ages out and only after she took the initiative to remind her caseworkers about the need for an emancipation plan. This meeting was attended by five paid professionals (not including myself) and Jenny. In the meeting, it was realized that Jenny has many enormous tasks to complete in the next five months including: to obtain her GED, enroll in a job training program, secure full-time employment, and find affordable housing that she can maintain once she ages out. This meeting was extremely overwhelming for Jenny, to say the least. As required by the YTP meeting structure, Jenny was given a list of responsibilities but no tangible resources to help her complete her assigned tasks. Luckily, Jenny now lives at LAYC where she receives weekly life skills but those sessions are not enough training to develop the kinds of skills needed to be an independent and thriving adult. In the last two weeks, I have spent 10 hours working with Jenny one-on-one helping her make progress on all of the tasks assigned to her at the YTP. This role should have been assumed by an OYE staff member but since youth must jump through loop holes just to schedule meetings with OYE staff, Jenny came looking for help elsewhere.

Kyia is twenty years old and will be aging out of care in the next six months. Her two most important goals were to continue her education and to secure full-time employment. She is currently attending community college and hopes to pursue a cosmetology certification in the fall. During one of Kyia's YTP meetings—which lasted three and a half hours and was attended by 7 paid professionals, 4 whom were OYE staff—Kyia expressed her need for a computer in order to complete assignments for her college courses. Two of the OYE staff at the meeting provided conflicting information about CFSA's computer eligibility criteria. I had to send 3 e-mails to figure out what correct policy was. Although Kyia has not used all of her ETV funds for the year, she was told that she was not eligible for the purchase of a computer because she is not studying a computer-related major.

After the meeting, I spent three hours helping Kyia complete some of her YTP assigned tasks and had to send an email in addition to making a phone call to OYE's financial aid specialist in order to help Kyia clear up misinformation and assumptions made during the YTP regarding her financial standing at the community college. Only then did OYE's financial aid specialist realize that an ETV application for Kyia had to be processed in order for Kyia to remain enrolled in her college courses.

Our experience with OYE indicates that the Youth Transition Planning Meetings do not work. YTP's are unsuccessful because they involve too many paid staff (usually 5-9), last 2-4 hours, have no guaranteed outcomes, and youth are not provided with tangible resources during these meetings. The youth are asked to set anywhere from 8-10 goals during their YTP and leave the meeting with a list of responsibilities that they have not been properly trained to carry out on their own. Although OYE staff and the caseworkers also assume responsibility for some of the assigned tasks, no one is given the responsibility to ensure that the youth's goals are actually met.

My recommendations are:

- Each youth should be assigned to an aging out specialist who will work one-on-one with the youth to set their goals and ensure that all of the necessary steps leading to the goals are properly accomplished. This person will also be responsible for sharing the details of the emancipation plan with the remaining professionals involved in the case.
- Aging out services should be contracted out of CFSA. We need to establish a community-based transition center that will provide tangible resources and a wide range of services to older youth beginning at the age of 15. If youth are expected to successfully emancipate out of care, the planning process must begin while they are in high school with a combination of life skills trainings and great emphasis on college enrollment.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to share my observations with you. I look forward to working with you to make positive changes regarding DC's child welfare system.