

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

**Nataly Ann Del Valle
Foster Care Campaign Staff, Young Women's Project**

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Good afternoon Council member Graham and other council members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Nataly Ann Del Valle. I am 18 and attend Maya Angelou Public Charter High School as a senior. I have been in the system for the past 5 years and I am a member of the Foster Care Campaign staff. I advocate with others to hopefully lead to a change in foster care. Right now I am a full time student, senior in high school, preparing for college next year, preparing for motherhood, and I have a part-time job. I moved into Catholic Charities in March 31st. Immediately, I could already see, feel, and was receiving a difference experience compared to a foster home. They welcomed me with new comforter, little snacks, and hygiene products.

I am here today to testify about the new Independent Living Stipend levels that CFSA is proposing. Current Chapter 63 ILP regulations require that youth be given \$520 a month. CFSA's new guidelines raise that stipend to \$538 per month. We – as the YWP youth staff who include several people in ILPs -- are very concerned that this level is way too low for youth who do not have jobs and will lead to illegal activities to get money. Director Donald has agreed to meet with us and to consider an increase in the stipend level for students and youth who do not have employment income. We are asking that you support our recommendation to raise the stipend level so that all youth will have at least \$938 a month (including public transportation funding of \$200 and mandatory savings of \$100).

Personal Experience: I am fortunate because I am in Catholic Charities – which provides a total of \$770 a month. This includes 1) \$150 for clothing; 2) \$200 in food cards; 3) \$150 in fare cards; and 4) \$170 for incidentals, toiletries, and allowance; and 4) \$100 deposited in a separate emancipation savings account for me. Because I am pregnant, I get another \$50 for food from the Women Infants Children (WIC) program. At this current level, this stipend allows me to meet my needs and still save some money. I stretch my food budget by cooking big meals and eating left-overs. I buy the sales, avoid name brands, and don't buy any goodies. I would love to be able to buy luxuries like juice or soy milk but it's too expensive so I buy kool-aide. I don't go out to eat or to the movies, Right now – if I want to have those other things, I need to have a job. As long as nothing breaks, I am okay for the month. I do worry though what happens if --- my phone breaks or gets stolen or I lose my fare cards. The budget does not leave any room for emergencies. I can't ever mess up. It makes me feel stressed. How am I going to get by when my daughter is here? I am also concerned that CFSA will require all placements to have a stipend of \$538 and so

my rate will be lowered and then I don't know what I am going to do. There are a lot of things that even my Catholic Charities budget does not cover.

- **A phone**
- **Fresh fruit, vegetables, meat, or juice** (it does cover McDonald's dollar menu meals)
- **Entertainment**
- **Cleaning supplies:** Some of us have to spend \$8 a week just to do laundry (\$13 if you include taking the metro to the Laundromat)
- **Public transportation:** The 2001 guidelines include \$90 for transportation. In the new guidelines, that money has been removed but there is not a reliable transportation policy in place yet. Those of us who receive transportation support from OYE get about \$30 a month. It costs at least \$200 a month to get to work, school, and appointments.
- **Savings:** This stipend level does not allow youth to save money and therefore, it doesn't give youth a safe transition out of the system. Youth will be spending all their savings to buy the basic essentials. We know one of goals is to see youth transition smoothly. This stipend proposal sets us up for failure.

Recommendations: The stipend team at YWP has spent the last couple months working on this issue. We reviewed the CFSA proposal, developed budgets, and collecting information about what food, clothes, and other supplies cost in DC. We also requested a meeting with Director Donald – who has agreed to meet with us next week. We have four recommendations:

- 1) Work with youth to figure out and understand their real needs and expenses and what \$538 can really buy. We are organizing a shopping trip for CFSA staff and we would like to invite you and your staff too –to see firsthand how you can stretch a \$538 budget to buy everything you need (including transportation) and still save money.
- 2) Break the budget down into more specific categories that reflect youth needs and expenditures and that youth can use to budget each month. Right now the stipend into three categories: food, clothes, and everything else.
- 3) Require more from youth and give them an opportunity to learn about financial management! Youth should not just be handed money each month. We should have to submit a monthly budget and track our

expenses and be required to attend financial management trainings. Requiring youth to track expenses would also help CFSA flag youth who were not spending responsibly. Doing a monthly budget is beneficial to both. The youth do a get more organized and have to figure out what we do. It will help communicate to CFSA that this is really not enough money and they could flag people who are not spending in responsible ways. They should also track the big monthly expenses – phone bill, big purchases.

- 4) Require youth who are working more than 10 hours a week to make contributions to their own living expenses. The base stipend for youth who are working should be lower because they have another income source. Full time students (college and vocational) should be spending their time studying and in class and will need more stipend support from CFSA. It's not fair to punish them with a poverty level stipend.
- 5) Increase the stipend to \$932 a month with \$100 a month going into an emancipation savings account. When youth have jobs and earnings, then an even higher level of savings should be required.
- 6) Pay out the stipends through direct deposit into savings accounts or through an EBT card (like the grandparent program). This would also reduce funds lost to theft or check cashing expenses and help CFSA identify youth who were not spending responsibly.

The Numbers: We do understand that the tax payers are paying for us and we should not have more than most other kids not in the system have. But here's what I don't understand....CFSA has a budget of \$241 million. There are about 1,500 youth in care and that number is going down. I'm not a budget expert but I can divide – so that means CFSA spends about \$153,000 on each youth. In ILPs, we get \$6,240 a year for all of our expenses (except rent). What is happening to the other \$147,000? I think it's probably used to pay the salaries of all the people who work with us – social workers, ILP staff, administrators, therapists. A lot of youth are not even using these resources. Meanwhile, youth are literally starving in ILPs. If you look into people's refrigerators – they are empty. Last year CFSA gave 16 million away because we "didn't need" it? I do need it.

We are asking you, Chairman Graham, Councilmember Barry, and other Human Services Committee Members to support our stipend recommendation of \$938 per youth, which will mean an additional \$336,000 in the ILP budget to cover 70 youth. This would make a huge difference in our lives and help to build a stronger ILP program. Thank you for listening.