

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

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Good Morning Council Member Graham and members of City Council. My name is Samaria Holton. I am 18 and a senior at Booker T. Washington Public Charter School. I will be attending Morgan State University in the summer, majoring in electrical engineering. My goal in life is to be remembered as a kind and caring person. Personally, I am not in foster care, but I work with Young Woman's Project to better the lives for youth that are in foster care, or are in a group home.

I am here, with my teammate Delores Whittaker, to share our recommendations on CFSA's allowance proposal. I am part of a youth team at YWP that has been working with CFSA during the past several months to develop an allowance proposal that would: 1) provide a small monthly allowance for youth ages 15-21 not in ILPs and 2) Require youth to attend school, enroll in enrichment activities, and engage in other positive behaviors to receive allowance. We thank CFSA for developing this program and know it will make a big difference in the lives of foster youth. At first Director Donald did not include this allowance in the CFSA budget. We contacted her and expressed our concerns. We are happy to report that she has agreed to include a base allowance of \$100 for all youth in foster homes and group homes. This will cost \$561,600 which will be absorbed through provider contracts since they are already giving allowances. We are still hoping to get an additional commitment for the incentive allowance categories which would cost an additional \$576,000.

**Recommendations:** In addition to the funding, our team has the following recommendations for the CFSA incentive allowance program.

- 1) **Both youth in foster homes and youth in group homes need to receive an allowance.** Right now the amount of allowance given varies greatly from home to home and it's not fair. This provides additional security and stability for the youth. When youth are transferred from one foster home to another (or from a group home) they will not fear loss of the allowance. All youth should receive the base allowance directly or in a firewalled emancipation account if they do not meet the three criteria.
- 2) **Youth should receive a base allowance of \$100 as long as they meet three requirements:** 1) No new involvement with the juvenile justice system; 2) Go to school and miss 3 or fewer days per month; and 3) Develop

and submit a monthly budget for individual spending (an addition to CFSA's proposal). This base allowance will allow youth to afford essential items like phones, additional clothes, and non-school/employment related transportation, and all items that are not required in the placement contracts.

**3) As proposed by CFSA, there should be four areas where youth have the opportunity to earn additional allowance.** They include the following:

- a) **Positive school behavior (\$30):** The current requirement for school performance on the CFSA allowance plan requires a B average or above. This does not account for youth who improve their grades. If a youth has a failing grade and brings it to a C that takes work and dedication and they should also be rewarded like the student who simply maintains the B average. Credit should also be given for school attendance improvements, especially youth showing significant improvement. *Instead of a \$150 annual bonus that is tied to grades only, we suggest \$30 a month during school months that includes grades, attendance, and positive school behavior.*
- b) **Enrichment activities and community involvement (\$30)** As described, to qualify, youth would need to participate in 8 hours per month of activities including sports, leadership programs, clubs, mentoring, employment and any after school or community activity where youth are building skills, self esteem, and knowledge.
- c) **Personal Responsibility and Citizenship (\$30):** As described, to qualify, youth need to demonstrate ongoing positive behavior and cooperation in their placements including: 1. At least 75% attendance at meetings, trainings, and other required activities; 2. Respectful behavior toward peers and staff; and 3. Completing monthly chores; and 4) Minimal curfew and abscondance violations during the month. We suggest 2 or fewer to allow for a little wiggle room. The original CFSA plan requires zero abscondance. Issues during the month along with no new involvement in the juvenile justice system.
- d) **Support and caregiver interaction (\$30):** **As described, to qualify, youth need to demonstrate:**
  - 1. **Positive** interaction with: social worker, family members, GAL, and other physicians and team members; and 2. Showing up for meetings on time, returning calls and working cooperatively.

- 4) **To qualify for the allowance, all enrolled youth should be required to set up savings accounts and save at least 10 percent of their allowance each month.** We are happy to report that CFSA is already working on this. We are still receiving details, but sessions on financial responsibility started on the week of April 7<sup>th</sup>. Mr. Phil Lartigue at OYE is working hard to make sure that all older youth have bank accounts and are receiving financial literacy training.
  
- 5) **An online system should be developed so that providers/placement sites can verify youth progress and so that youth can track their own progress.** This on-line system would increase the timeliness and transparency, reduce caregiver-youth conflicts in qualifying for and receiving the allowance, and help youth build skills that they will need to navigate the on-line world. Foster parents, group home staff, enrichment activity staff, and social workers would use the on-line system to qualify their youth each month.
  
- 6) **Use direct deposit for youth with bank accounts or an EBT card for youth without bank accounts. This would also help youth and CFSA track expenses.** This would help cut down on dollars lost through theft which is common in all placements, opportunities to build financial management skills, and fewer logistical responsibilities and power struggles for placements. Placement related money should be approved and administered by foster parents or group home staff.
  
- 7) **In order to help youth succeed at qualifying for the allowance, we are asking that CFSA provide additional support.** In 2013, computer access is required for academic excellence. Computers with internet access should be required for all group homes. Youth in foster homes should have access to computers in school or close by their placements. CFSA should identify tutors and ensure placements are providing academic support. In addition, school and community based activities that meet enrichment criteria should be identified and social workers work with youth to enroll in activities and ensure youth receive transportation/transportation funding from the activity

We ask that you support funding for these programs that will make a huge difference in the lives of foster youth. Thank you for listening.