

**Testimony to the Committee on Health and Human Services
For the Budget Oversight Hearing on the Child and Family Services Agency
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Good afternoon Councilmember Alexander and other Council Members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Shannon Mack. I am 21 years old and a graduate of Cardozo High School. I am a member of the Foster Care Campaign staff who also testified for the CFSA hearing. I'm testifying today because I aged out of foster care and am currently living at Covenant House which is supported through DHS. We are advocates for youth. We do outreach to youth and find ways to change and improve the system. I am a youth advocate because I believe that foster kids who need help should be heard whether or not adults feel that they are right. Thank you for hearing my testimony.

I am here to request that you support funding in the amount of \$110,000 for transportation assistance to youth who age of foster care at the age of 21 until their 22nd birthday. I also asking that you support funding through the CFSA budget for the development of a Young Adult Support Center a place where emancipated foster youth can receive desperately needed support in the areas of education, employment and health and wellness.

I aged out of the foster care system on June 20th 2014. On my 21st birthday, I packed up my own stuff. I put all my stuff in my social worker's car and she took me to the shelter and left me there and said goodbye. I didn't have a bank account or any savings. I had myself and my clothes.

Aging Out of Foster Care

When I was nineteen I started my Youth Transitional Planning meetings. In these meetings they discuss my goals and future plans. Sadly no one followed up to make sure that I was actually completing the things on my goal list. No one asked if I needed help with anything on my goal list or helped breakdown my goals into smaller achievable items. Two of my goals were to get a full time job and have my own place at least by the time I turned 21.

The group home staff helped me fill out job applications but they also never checked back in to make sure that I was following up with the applications. In my final five months in care I felt like my social worker was not actively helping me to prepare for the exit. It felt like she was happy to have one less person on her case load. On my 21st birthday my social worker made me feel alone and hopeless like I had no one. I didn't realize that I was going to have to do everything on my own without the support that I had when I was in the system.

When I left care, I was given a collaborative worker from the Columbia Heights Collaborative now called Collaborative Solutions Community. In the past year I have had three collaborative workers because of staff turn-over. I found out that I would get a collaborative worker a couple of months before I aged out and I met my first worker during my very last YPT meeting.

Overall I have not had a good experience receiving aftercare services from the Collaboratives. The location of the Collaborative has been an issue. My shelter is across town and I have to go all the way to Columbia Heights from Anacostia. I never met my first worker because she left shortly after I was assigned to her case load.

My second worker helped me get food stamps but that was it. She left about a month and a half after I was assigned to her case load. My third case was not much help either until I testified last month. I asked her to help me find shelter. She said she was busy and she has meetings to attend. I was couch-surfing and out in the cold all day and she still did not help with anything. I did see a change after I testified. Since I last testified my collaborative worker has been helping and assisting me in getting me ready for job corps or any other goal I'm trying reach. I will say she is trying her hardest to help now.

Another issue I had after exiting foster care was obtaining documents. I did not even have my important documents like my social security card, birth certificate, my Individual Education Plan (IEP), my most recent educational assessment, and my immunizations records. I had to get them on my own by visiting many of different offices and agencies. I am still working on getting my IEP, high school transcripts and immunization records. My collaborative worker is helping with these things.

Housing

When emancipated from foster care at age 21 I did not have any family to live with. I have been living in a few shelter programs. I was at Wanda Alston which is a shelter for LBGTQ youth and now I am at Covenant House. This is a 90 day shelter program for youth 18-21. Technically my 90 days is up but I am being allowed to stay because I am preparing to enter Job Corp next month. Although I am thankful to have a place to stay life at Covenant House is far from perfect. Our meal portions are small. We do not get a real breakfast, only a granola bar or a piece of fruit, before we are sent out for the entire day. They give us child portions of food. There are also issues with the staff. Many of the staff lack compassion and are mean. The shelter staff members eat so much of the food there is often not enough for the residents.

Employment & Vocational Training

Finding a job has been really hard. I don't have any real job searching assistance. I don't know anyone who is hiring. I apply on line and in person. I don't have access to a computer so it's very difficult. I am trying to get into the Job Corp program at the Woodstock location in Baltimore. I want a fresh start with myself and life feel like I need to get away and focus. Right now I'm using my different resources like the people I run into on daily bases or I just walk into jobs and ask are they hiring I really don't care where I work right now I just know I need some type of income to survive

Transportation

Transportation has been a major struggle this past year. My first shelter did not provide any transportation support. Covenant House provides tokens but it's not enough. They give a pack that contains 10 tokens. This equals \$ 17.50 if you put it on your SmartTrip. I need to get to get back and forth to work; to my son's doctor's appointments; getting important documents and running errands; and for job searching. It cost \$6.80 a day to travel back and forth to see my son. I try and go and see him every day so that costs about \$47.60 a week. Traveling to work costs \$8.00 day or \$24.00/week. Other travel costs for appointments, job searching, etc. cost approximately \$15 a week. This puts my monthly travel costs at nearly \$350 a month. I pay for transportation with money from my job at The Young Women's Project but only working six hours a week does not allow me to pay for much more than transportation to back and forth to work. When I run out of money I either ask for an advance from my job or I ask the bus driver to allow me to ride for free—and this is taking a chance.

RECOMMENDATIONS**Transportation Support**

Youth who emancipate from foster care at age 21 should receive transportation assistance until their 22nd birthday. This support is will make a significant difference for youth during the first year after they age out because most don't have jobs and getting around to interviews, schools or just taking care of business is very expensive. CFSA should provide recently emancipated youth either \$100 in monthly support or a unlimited monthly pass costing that will cost the agency \$64 a month. The total yearly cost for providing this support will be approximately \$110,208.

Young Adult Support Center

Aftercare services for foster youth who age-out of foster care should be provided through a Young Adult Support Center (YASC). The YASC will be a site where they can go for support getting into post-secondary education programs, finding and preparing for employment and connecting with local resources. This will be a one-stop center where you can get individual coaching and group training. It will also be "youth-friendly" place where they can go during the day and take a shower, buy low-cost healthy food and maybe take a fitness class.

Having a YASC will make a difference in my life because I need a place to go where I feel welcome and supported. It is hard having to constantly travel around the city to access training and resources. Aftercare services for foster youth should be housed at the YASC because there would be people there who know how to help youth get into school and find jobs—they would have the training to do that unlike the workers at the Collaboratives.

Thank you for your time and for listening to my testimony.