



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

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Good afternoon City Council members. My name is T' Kara Plater. I am 18 years old and I am part of the DC foster care system and reside in a group home. I attend Cesar Chavez Public Charter High School and I will be graduating this year.

I am here to talk about two issues today: the education of foster youth and the Educational Training Vouchers (ETV). I am very concerned about foster care youth that want to pursue a college/university education but are not getting the voucher. I am getting ready to apply myself and I am worried because I have seen the ETV money decline for many foster care youth that I know with goals of going to college.

I am planning to go to college and have been accepted at three colleges so far (Chainy University, Montgomery College and Lincoln University). College is really important to me because I am aiming to pursue a better life for myself which is why I am determined to graduate. I know a lot of people who didn't make it to college – a lot of people like my friends and family. I think college will help me to become a better person and learn new ways of doing things. My overall goal and dream is to become a social worker in the child welfare system. I want to be able to help young people like me who need support. Helping people is my passion. Most of the time, if there is help needed, I make sure I assist the best way I can.

Getting into college was not easy. It was a lot of work. Luckily the staff at my school – Cesar Chavez Public Policy Charter School -- encouraged me a lot to apply to a lot of schools. I applied to over 50 schools all over the east coast. The staff gave us information packets about scholarships. They had weekly talks about what we needed to do. We had field trips. They helped us write applications and followed up to make sure we sent the applications. The group home staff helped a little bit, especially with pep talks and scholarship information.

We learned that only 8-10% of older youth in the system are enrolled in college right now. That's about 15 each year. I am proud to be among them --- but I am concerned about all the other youth who have not had the support I've had through my school and will not be able to apply for school.

One problem is that CFSA does not help much with education. I received very little help from CFSA. My current social worker did not help at all. I've had five social workers in the last two years and had only one good one -- who I had for



six months. She left in January. She encouraged me to apply to college. I did go to one Keys for Life session recently. It was on DCCAP and LEAP. The information was helpful but there was no follow up or individual support. I came. I signed in. I left. There is one big group with one person talking but the youth were not engaged. That is why a lot of youth don't show interest in going. No one has even mentioned ETV money at the financial aid session. It feels like a set up. They collect money for us but we are not getting it. Most of the people I know in the system never even heard of the ETV. The people I know who applied got rejected. I am worried that I won't have enough money to finish school or will have to go into debt. I started saving last year and I am good at budgeting but I don't get that much in in order to really save.

Education is important for the youth so that they can change and learn new things. Right now there are no standards for us. People think foster youth can't achieve anything and we can if we are given a chance. A lot of my friends have dropped out of school. Some started families. Young people need to be pushed to go to college. They need to strive for a better life. College is the road to a better life. CFSA is supposed to be our parent. Getting us into school is their responsibility --just like its parents' responsibility to help their kids get into school.

Recommendations: First -- CFSA should be required to set goals about education. Not just set goals but enforce them. So that children know it's possible. As soon as you get into the system, youth should get information about college and the message that they can go and that they can do something positive with their lives. Next, we recommend that Keys for Life be removed from CFSA and given to an organization that really cares about education for foster youth and has a track record. They changed the name but it's the same program. They are upsetting the youth. They are hiding information that youth are supposed to know about. Finally, the ETV program needs to be changed so that youth actually know about it and can apply. Since CFSA has not done a good job with this program, we recommend that it be removed from CFSA and run by an organization who is committed to getting as many youth into college as possible.

We hope that you will work with us on these issues. Thanks for the opportunity to testify and for your commitment to foster youth.