

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

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Good afternoon Councilmember Graham and other council members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Valerie Mallory. I just turned 19. I have a four week old daughter Aaliyah. I graduated from Anacostia high school last year where I also played on the basketball team. My next step is to sign up for summer classes for PG Community College. I am interested in studying Business Management and Culinary Arts. I would like to transfer to Morgan State eventually. I live at St. Elizabeth Ministries. I have been in the system for the past 6 years. At first I was in group homes and foster homes and then my father's house. I am a member of the Foster Care Campaign staff. We advocate for foster care kids. Thank you for being concerned and allowing the youth who are affected to share their experiences.

In the past, I've had some tough times living in group care but in the past year, my life really turned around. I feel so happy and for the first time in a long time am really excited about my future.

I am a new mom. Being a new mom is good. It's changing my life around. It's helping me see better things and stay out of trouble. I see the world differently. You have to work hard to take care of a new born. Wake up early. Change her. Feed her. Rock her to sleep. She is adorable everyone loves her. I don't go out anymore. I am getting to places early. I have to plan in advance so I have a baby sitter then I can go out. I see myself in five years having a good job and my own house or apartment and getting ready to have my own business. My daughter would be 5 years old by then.

Four months ago, I moved from the couch at my father's house to Elizabeth Ministries. I love it. The staff is respectful and very supportive. They provide transportation and baby care when I am at work or school. They have a day care center in the building. We have a house mom so there is always someone to talk to if you are down and have problems. You are expected to live like an independent person and take care of yourself but they still provide the right level of support. I get a stipend check that is enough to get clothing, food, and supplies for my child. They help us go to the grocery store. We are in our own apartments which are really nice.

Recently I switched to an OYE social worker. She checks in on me every week and is very responsive and helpful. In the past, my social workers never checked in on me. Sometimes in a group home I felt endangered. I didn't want to fight. My social worker never responded to my phone calls.

As soon as Aaliyah is 6 weeks old, she can go into day care and I will try to find a full time job. I would like to do cooking work. My past work experience was at the Redskins' stadium where I was a cook & cashier. I had two summer jobs: one at a daycare center and the other at a scholarships program. I would like to have more training. I signed up for the Pathways Program and they were in touch right away. My social worker is helping me apply to PG Community College for summer classes. I can't wait to get to college and do homework. I miss it!

Overall, I am very happy with my care but there are a couple things that would really help me:

Transportation: I've been getting the monthly passes, which has worked well. But public transportation is a challenge with a newborn – especially with this weather. I don't want to bring a newborn out in the cold. We need to be able to go door to door for doctor appointments. We need taxi vouchers.

Preventing Theft in Group Homes: In my past, I had a lot of stuff stolen from me -- underwear, bras, socks and shoes. We need locks on doors and closets for group's homes. Everyone should have their own personal key so they can lock stuff up. Staff members should keep up with the keys. The food in group's homes is pretty bad. There is not enough of it and it's not very good or nutritious.

Better Background Checks for Foster Parents: I've been in many group homes that were not very secure. There were foster parents who were abusive verbally and even physically. But I had to live somewhere. That is all behind me. CFSA should do better background checks. Someone needs to come to the house and observe the parents in the house.

Thank you for listening.