

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

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February 26, 2013

Hello, my name is Amy Mejia. I would first like to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my experiences and opinions on these important topics. I am a 19-year-old college student attending Trinity University and am also a teen parent. I am a youth staff with the Young Women's Project and a Youth Ambassador with OYE. I have been in care since I was 12; a total of seven years. I am here today to talk about four main issues including placement, parenting, stipend levels, and transitioning out of care.

My experience in care has been alright overall. When I first came into care I was taken to a temporary group home, I stayed there for about three to four months and was then reunified with my mother. Unfortunately, terrible circumstances led to me being removed again and returned to a foster home. I have been in multiple placements and have had multiple social workers since being back in the system. This caused me many headaches. I was young and didn't understand why these people were constantly coming in and out of my life. I was frustrated and I would shut down a lot. In fact, I constantly found myself repeating myself, or explaining a scenario over and over because every time I looked around there was someone new at the door. Or I was at some meeting where people who knew little to nothing about me except the stuff they read in a file asked me questions or assumed my thoughts and feelings regarding a new adjustment I was soon to face. Though my experience with the system now has improved, I am still a bit bitter. With the help of a few mentors, I am slowly but surely getting the resentment out of my system.

Transitioning: I have two years left before I age out and become completely independent. I feel confident and prepared that by the time I turn 21 I will have stable employment, be a junior in college, and have a stable place to live. I was lucky enough to have my third CFSA social worker, Kim Beard, to be loving, caring, and compassionate towards me. She made sure I was informed about the transition process. Every six months we sat down and reviewed a plan and updated it, including my education plan. Catholic Charities helps me with most of the life skills needed to become a successful independent adult. Right now I'm working on making sure I have stable income, making sure CFSA will pay tuition until 23, and trying to get a CASA mentor in place. My only worry is that all of my efforts will fail and I will end up in a shelter.

I am working with Catholic Charities staff to secure housing. I am a full time student and do event planning on the side. I work for YWP and Youth Ambassadors. Catholic Charities has a program where as long as you are working 20 hours a week, you can find your own apartment that they subsidize and then it turns into your own after you age out. Now that I have three part time jobs, I can transition into that program. I have a Catholic Charities social worker who only deals with matters pertaining to Catholic Charities. She helps with apartments and if I need help finding employment, she speaks to the workforce developer and helps me do a resume and cover letter. If I need a tutor or extra help, she will help me find a tutor. My CFSA social worker helps with appointments, court dates, and helped with the day care. I've had great social workers from CFSA and Catholic Charities.

Parenting: Because I am a mother, I am forced to make some demanding decisions to ensure that my daughter will be taken care of appropriately, one of which is daycare. Three child care providers did not receive payment from CFSA because of a social worker's irresponsible actions. I was in a foster home and working and my daughter was in an in-home day care. No one at CFSA was authorizing the day care, so they were not getting paid. The daycare facility kept telling me that they weren't being paid and at that time my daughter was removed until they received a letter stating CFSA'S intent to pay or some form of payment. Fortunately, that situation was resolved after a 10 month wait, which ended with the daycare receiving their back pay. Currently, my daycare situation is secure and my social worker has been on top of getting the required paperwork in. It was frustrating because I was working and I would always have to take off work – which jeopardized my employment status.

Placement: I joined Catholic Charities in September 2012 after previously living at Umbrella. The differences between the two placements are substantial. Umbrella staff was more lenient, but not very consistent. They took forever to make a repair in the apartment. It took longer than a week to fix a broken toilet. The building we lived in was very old. The heat was inconsistent and we didn't have it for two weeks at one point. They had life skills but they were not mandatory. Unlike Umbrella, Catholic Charities are on top of things. Catholic Charities has mandatory life skills and mandatory parenting classes. Catholic Charities helps you with your budget. Umbrella just gave us budgeting worksheets. The care at Catholic Charities is much better care.

Stipend Levels: As a parent, it is hard to get everything I need for my daughter and me with the stipend we receive. At Umbrella, we received \$420 a month plus \$150 into escrow, which was supposed to cover food, transportation, toiletries, and everything else for both of us. At Catholic Charities I am getting \$400 in cash, \$400 in food cards, and \$100 for transportation in fare cards. This is a big improvement over Umbrella, but it is still a

challenge, especially with the children's portion of the stipend. This is extremely unfair, being that our expenses are constantly increasing.

Education: I am studying criminal justice and international affairs. Before I went to school, I attended MedTech for phlebotomy and received my certification. OYE paid for that. It was \$1,900 for six weeks and they covered it. I was going to use phlebotomy as a way to get a job while in school, but that didn't work out because of the schedule. I started full time at Trinity in the fall of 2012. I did my application and financial aid myself. My social worker gave me the link to everything and I filled out my required information and sent the confirmation to OYE. I never spoke to Shalonda Knox, OYE Financial Aid Specialist, before I was enrolled; however, I gave Shalonda the information and everything has been paid on time.

Policy Suggestions: I have two suggestions for CFSA:

1. To start a program where children of teen parents in foster care can have the opportunity to attend higher quality daycare facilities, not just the ones that accept daycare vouchers, but La Petite, Bright Futures, and a number of other quality daycare centers. There should also be some sort of criteria that must be met before foster kids can be accepted. Not only is it statistically shown that children who attend higher daycare facilities score higher on tests and have better grades than those who attend the traditional facilities, but, by allowing our children to obtain something that wasn't given to us at a young age, it can promote means to end the cycle of being the stereotypical "teenage mom" or "child of a foster kid."
2. CFSA should come up with a stipend amount that stays the same in all foster care placements. There should be no budget cuts or deductions.

Growing up in the system I have always felt as though social workers and other CFSA workers only viewed me as a job, but this is my life and they should take it seriously and put themselves in my shoes. Thank you for letting me testify before your Committee today.