

**Testimony to the Committee on Human Services****For the Budget Oversight Hearing on the Child and Family Services Agency****Dereka Davis****Foster Care Campaign Staff, Young Women's Project****April 24, 2013**

Good afternoon Council Member Graham and other council members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Dereka Davis and I am 16 years old. I attend National Collegiate Preparatory and I am in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Right now I live the Ionia Whipper Group Home. I have been in Foster Care for 16 years. I work at the Young Women's Project and I am a member of the Foster Care Campaign Staff. My goal is to be a very successful woman in the future. I'm interested in opening up my own business or being an actress.

**I am here today to testify about the need for a regular clothing voucher for youth in foster homes and group homes.** Director Donald, after hearing our concerns, is committed to working with us to make sure that youth in foster homes and group homes have enough money for clothing. She was able to find some money in the budget to increase the clothing funding amount and we are asking for you to support our recommendations for a \$1,600 a year clothing voucher. We will be working with CFSA on implementation planning for the clothing voucher program.

From the time I first entered Ionia Whipper I did not have enough uniforms. All I had was one pair of pants and one shirt. I let the staff and the social worker and even my CASA worker know about this issue. Months passed, meetings were held about the uniform issue but still I did not have enough uniforms. Finally, I took matters into my own hands and asked the school for two uniform shirts. I received them that same day. This issue made me very angry. I didn't understand why people who were supposed to be my guardians or caregiver were being so lazy and moving at a nonchalant pace. I felt like the things I needed most didn't really matter and when I needed something I was going to get it on their time and not when I really needed it. This made me want to be independent and not ask them for anything because when I did ask I never got it very soon.

Another time when I needed clothes was when I was living in a foster home. The only clothing I had was the clothes the woman from the emergency home brought. It took three months after I was placed in the home for my foster mother to finally buy some clothes. She bought them in her own time even though she knew I needed them right away. To make it worse she didn't even let me come along. She went alone and picked out the items she thought I liked. She continued to do this up until the time I left her home. I felt like she was making decisions for me and I didn't have a say so in anything. I was grateful that she was finally buying me clothes but I didn't like that she was buying them herself and not letting me pick out what I liked. I felt like I was being controlled and didn't have power over even the choice of what I would wear.

The lack of sufficient funds to pay for clothing can lead youth to searching for other sources to get clothing. Youth are then in a situation where they start to do illegal things to get the money for clothing or they have to rely on boyfriends or girlfriends. Some youth wear clothes that are in a condition where should be thrown away. Some may even wear their friends' clothes or maybe the clothes of non-system siblings. These issues can be very frustrating and can lead to extra problems such as angry or volatile behavior.

The way you express yourself fashionably is important to teens. We need to be able to pick out our own clothes and to have more choices other than Burlington Coat Factory. Stores that youth prefer are Forever 21, H&M, Macys, Old Navy, DSW, and Shoe City. These stores you can walk out satisfied because they are more for teens and they have different variety of things and are not very expensive.

Some of our staff from YWP will also testify about CFSA's incentive allowance program. Youth can use the allowance to buy those extra items, like accessories or extra clothes but it should not be the primary funding source for needed seasonal clothing.

**Our Recommendations: We propose that CFSA increase funding for clothing for foster youth, ages 15 to 20, living in group homes and foster homes, as follows:**

1. Youth would receive \$400 per season 4 times per year (for a total of \$1,600). We attached a list of clothing items that should be included in the annual budget.
2. Youth would receive the money directly from their social workers in the form of a debit card so they can go to the store of their own selection.
3. Youth would be required to work with foster parents and group home staff to create a clothing budget before being given the card to ensure that money was spent as planned. Youth would be required to provide receipts for all items purchased and purchases could also be tracked through the debit card.

We ask you Chairman Graham and the other members of the Committee on Human Services to support our clothing voucher recommendation of \$1,600 a year per youth, which will mean an additional \$748,000 in the CFSA budget. This will make a big difference in the lives of many foster youth. Thanks for your time and attention.