

**Testimony to the Committee on Health and Human Services****For the Performance Oversight Hearing on the Child and Family Services Agency****Dolores L. Whittaker****Foster Care Campaign Staff, Young Women's Project****February 18, 2015**

Good Afternoon Council Member Alexander and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is Dolores Whittaker. I'm 18 and I am a senior at Accotink Academy located in Springfield, Virginia. I am planning to enter college this fall. Right now I am not sure where I am going to attend. I am not sure what I would like to major in but I am interested in information technology. I have five brothers and three sisters and I am from Ward 8. I have been in the foster care system since 2008 and I live in a foster home in Hyattsville, Maryland. I have been working as a youth staff at the Young Women's Project for two years. I enjoy advocating for foster care youth. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Currently I live in a foster home located in Hyattsville, Maryland. I have been there for a year. This is my sixth foster home since entering foster care in 2008. I have been having issues with clothing. My foster mother does not really buy me clothes. It has gotten to the point where it is required by my social worker to show receipts showing that she has spent the required money on clothing. If she has not spent that money then it rolls to the next month. My foster mom have got caught in her own lie before when she said she bought me clothes from the store but never had the proof for them.

There have been issues with my hair care. When I was in 11th grade there was a problem with getting my hair done. People at my school were buying hair products just for my hair to look better than it did. When I wanted to get braids, I couldn't get it because it was too much money and I didn't have enough. I was paying for my hair by myself. Working with my social worker we came up with a solution where my foster mother would be

responsible for paying for half of the cost of my hair getting done. Hair is a part of hygiene and self esteem.

When going out in public, especially going to high school, everyone always asks me, when are you going to get your hair done? It is embarrassing. Last year I would get very depressed and had to get on depression medicine. I didn't like myself and my self esteem was low because my hair always looked a mess. It made me feel bad about myself and 11th grade was the worst year of my life.

I have had clothing issues since I moved with my foster mother. I started having issues getting clothes from my foster mother last fall when it was time to buy my school uniform. At the end of the summer I received my back-to-school clothing allowance. I get it once a year at the start of school.. I get it in the form of a \$300 Burlington Coat Factory gift card directly from my social worker. It would be helpful if they gave the students a choice between three stores so they can pick the one closest to their house. Target or Wal-Mart might be good choices because the stores are more convenient. Burlington is pretty far away and they do not have a lot of uniforms. Burlington has a lot of nice things but the one I went to only had one kind of uniform pants. I get my shirts from my school. I had to pay for my uniform pants. I got one pair from H&M, one from JC Penny's. My foster mother said it was my responsibility to pay for them because I had my own money.

Each month I am supposed to get \$80 (GET EXACT AMOUNT) for clothing. This is not supposed to come from my monthly allowance but it should come from my foster mother's monthly check. Since I have been living with her I have had issues receiving my money to buy clothing. Over the past year I have needed underclothing like bras, socks and underwear and I had to constantly remind her that I would need the clothing money to purchase these things. When my foster mother did purchase items they looked like they were from the thrift store. For Christmas she gave me coat that had a hole in arm. She says that she didn't get the coat or anything else from the thrift store but I do not believe her.

Because of all of this, my social worker set up a system where my foster mother is supposed to show receipts to show what she bought and if she doesn't use the entire amount should roll over to the next month.

My foster mother has never visited my school. Not once. It doesn't matter that I was a junior or now a senior she should check up on me. I have IEP meetings and she feels like since I have a social worker then she doesn't need to be there. She will ask about what happened later but I feel like she should be there. This affects me because I feel like she is not my parent. What does it say if a child has been at a home for more than a year and the foster parent has never visited the school or gone to see my teachers. I had some issues at school and she did call but never visited. At other foster homes they came to the school for meeting or appointments. She has never seen my school.

On the 27 of this month, Foundations will lose their contract with CFSA. I will have to get a new social worker and move to a new foster home. This will be my fifth social worker and my seventh foster home. I will have to go through the process of getting to know a new social worker and a new family. I have been told that I will be in one agency by my social worker and another from my foster mother. This will all happen in March and I do not know anything yet. This makes me feel frustrated and stressed. I have been with my current social worker for close to two years. In the eight years I have been in care I have had five social workers. With a new social worker you have to get to know someone all over again. Answer the same questions. It feels like training a new dog, I am the trainer. I have to see how they work. Some are good and some are bad. I have to have another person learn all of my personal business. It makes me feel irritated.

Moving foster homes is very stressful because often you will lose things in the process of moving. I have asked my current social worker to at least give me one week notice before I will have to move so that I can have time to pack and prepare.

Despite all of these not-so-great things that are going on there are some things that are going well. I have not had any issue with getting transportation. I get a monthly pass and \$20 fare cards from OYE transportation.

When that runs out I have been able to get money from my foster mother. My senior year is going well. Prom is in May and I graduate in June. Hopefully CFSA will pay for my pictures and prom expenses.

I have also been getting college preparation support from the staff at OYE. Last year they arranged for me to go on a college tour and I will be going on another this month to George Mason University and Northern Virginia Community College. I hope to get more support from the OYE staff as I apply and enroll in college in the next few months.

I have a few recommendations to share with you today:

- CFSA should give youth more choices for their back-to-school gift card. By only limiting the choice to Burlington Coat Factory, it may be hard to get there and it is hard to get all of the needed items there due to the limited locations and uniform selections.
- CFSA should better train and monitor foster parents to make sure they are providing the children's needs. They should know what rights and resources are available for their foster youth because many do not know what we are supposed to get. CFSA should also let the youth know their rights and what should be provided for them. Many things I would have never known if I had not been working at the Young Women's Project.
- CFSA should allow the youth to meet the new families before they are placed in their homes. Social workers should do an inventory of the youth's clothing every three months and at the beginning and ending of the placement.

Thank you for your time and attention. Have a blessed day.