

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

**Kianni Jones
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Good afternoon Councilmember Graham and other Council Members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kianni Jones and I am 23 years old. I was in foster care for five years and I aged out on September 9, 2011. I worked at the Young Women's Project for almost three years as a member of the Foster Care Campaign Staff. My main focus right now is to finish my associate's degree and find a job that can pay for school and my living expenses. I am living with my former foster father who allows me to contribute as much rent as I can every month.

I am here to testify about my experiences aging out of foster care. I would also like to share the challenges that I face as a transgender woman when trying to find and maintain employment.

It has been about a year and a half since I aged out of foster care. Although I have been lucky because I have a place to live, life has been a struggle. If it wasn't for my foster father, I would become homeless. I qualified for rapid housing and received a total of \$4,000 and was able to help my foster father with the rent at the house. I have had meetings with the Georgia Avenue Collaborative. We discussed certain goals—education and career goals. They also helped me connect with food banks at local churches so that I could get food. I was supposed to receive some SSI benefits after aging out but that didn't happen. I feel as though my social worker waited at the last minute so that she wouldn't have to do any extra work.

Right now I am looking for a full time job. I have three part time jobs that provide me with income. I am working with the Young Women's Project on blogging and other writing projects; I am doing massage therapy; and I also do hair. I am enrolled at Montgomery College part time and I am studying information technology. Although it would have been extremely helpful, the Collaboratives didn't help me with enrolling in or finding money to pay for school. I have done all of this myself. Financial aid is currently paying for my college tuition and I am paying out of pocket for school books and other supplies.

Finding a job is difficult because of my lack of training and my gender transition change. In high school I received job training through the Marriott job training program. I never received training anywhere else when I was in the system although I was offered support with resume writing, interview skills and other similar skills.

Being transgender adds another layer to my job search. When I found a position I was harassed, discriminated against, and lacked opportunities for advancement. I was faced with a low paying job that paid me \$7.50 an hour which wasn't much. I was working at a local department store. The benefit was transportation. That was the only part that was taken care of. I've had a very hard time keeping jobs. I find myself only lasting for six months to a year. Those in the transgender community are four times more likely to live in poverty. The options are more limited. Avenues that are open to others such as the military are not available. Transgender people experience unemployment at twice the rate of the general population. Ninety percent of transgender people report experiencing harassment, mistreatment or discrimination on the job. *Sources from GLAAD.org.*

Recommendations: As I look back on my aging out process and my first year out of the system, I have two recommendations:

1) Youth who age out should have additional supports that extend through their first two years out of the system.

It would have made a big difference in my life to be able to get transportation, job assistance and education support during the past two years. Sending youth who have left the system to the Collaboratives is not enough because they mostly provide referrals. They don't provide the one-on-one help that would really make a difference. Also, LGBTQ youth are at greater risk for discrimination and need additional support.

2) Housing: Housing is one of the biggest obstacles for youth aging out. We need government subsidized housing during that first year out of the system as we try to find a job. There should be people who help locate affordable and safe housing. Providing a list is not sufficient. Having housing puts youth in a position where they can focus on finding employment or pursuing their education.

Thank you for your time.