

**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 Chairman Graham and members of the Committee on Human Services. I am Marcia Huff and I am the Manager for the Foster Care Campaign (FCC) at the Young Women's Project. We are a DC based non-profit organization that builds the leadership and power of DC youth so that they can lead campaigns to improve youth serving intuitions. The FCC trains more than thirty youth leaders every year to become advocates and organizers in improving the lives of DC foster youth.

The FCC focuses on the pressing concerns of older foster youth (ages 15 to 20). According to CFSA data, at the end of 2013 there were 574 youth in this age group under the care (out of home) of CFSA. I have become especially concerned about the employment needs of older youth in foster care. At the end of 2013 there were 342 youth in this age group.

Each year I search high and low for foster youth to join our youth staff. I have made contact with nearly 100 foster youth. I hired thirty. The youth we hire receive development and advocacy training. We work in partnership with the youth to address the important issues facing foster youth in the DC system. We assist them with their individual advocacy and become an important part of their support system.

Over the past year I have met numerous disconnected foster youth under the care of the CFSA. It is heartbreaking. Almost all express an interest in finding employment. Many say they are bored and would love something to do and could also use the money.

There are a significant number of youth who are "in process." They are waiting for something to happen or come through. The majority are neither in school nor did they graduate from high school. Possibly they are waiting to get back into high school or a "stay" program. Some want to get into a GED program. Others are enrolled in a GED program but are not attending regularly. For some a year goes by and they are still searching for the right GED program. None are working. Many are living in a group home or participating in an Independent Living Program. They spend a lot of time doing nothing. Although most have hard working social workers they seem to be operating on their own. They are given referrals to programs or a list of possible job opportunities. Referrals are 100% ineffective for providing services and assistance to youth because they are the least likely to follow-up. There doesn't seem to be anyone motivating them and holding them accountable for completing their education and finding a job. These youth

are the most vulnerable for homelessness or worse after they age out of the system. The youth need immediate and intensive attention and engagement so that they will be prepared for life after foster care.

Reaching these youth is not easy. They are the least likely to show up for appointments and most probably do not attend OYE and CFSA events or programs. Persistence is required. We have hired youth who fall into this “disconnected” category. Most struggle in the beginning with showing up. Often it takes scheduling an interview three times before they appear at our office. This is after calling, emailing, texting, speaking with group home staff, and basically semi-harassing them. For those who join our staff they struggle with regular attendance and arriving on time. It takes a great deal of reinforcement but the majority show improvement over the first few weeks. A continuous effort to sharpen their work habits is necessary to prepare the youth for success in the workforce.

The majority of youth are not prepared to succeed in the workforce. They might have adequately written resumes and know how to dress for an interview. They might even show up on time to work on a regular basis but most do not possess what it takes to maintain employment. Many come lacking important academic skills. Some struggle with basic reading comprehension and most have little to no experience writing more than a few sentences. They lack essential skills such as email writing, interacting with colleagues, communicating work absences, and maintaining a professional deportment. They often do not know how to communicate assertively, advocate for themselves, problem solve effectively, or resolve conflicts with their peers.

The employment services that OYE provides to older youth have greatly improved over the past year. In the fall OYE opened the Career Pathways Unit. The Unit provides job readiness training for the youth and connects them with meaningful, career centered vocational training. They assist youth with finding jobs. Their focus is to lead youth on the path to more than a job but rather to a career. I am impressed with their work. They are supportive and they make sure that the youth stay consistent with their employment search. They also have a great bulletin board at the OYE office that contains numerous employment and training opportunities.

Unfortunately, many youth are not aware of the existence of the program. They are doing great work but if only a small portion of youth are aware of their existence then the program cannot be effective.

We have the following recommendations for expanding the deepening the employment services for foster youth:

In order to be truly successful youth need comprehensive, outcome focused training. In addition to the more traditional employment trainings like how to write a resume or cover letter or how to prepare for an interview, etc. youth need intensive preparation if they are going to be truly successful with finding and a keeping a job.

There should be training in communication, problem solving, and conflict resolution. This should be done in a group setting where youth can learn and grow with their peers. In these groups they also will have the opportunity to practice the skills that they are learning. This training will provide the foundation for positive interaction with coworkers and supervisors. They need to have an understanding of the importance of showing up to work on time every day, communicating when they are unable to, and how to be present and engaged at work.

There is no one-size fits all for career training. Not every student will or should go to college therefore CFSA should not operate as though that will be the case. A student might have interests or skills that are better suited for a career as a hair stylist, welder, plumber or electrician. They could begin training for these careers before they graduate from high school. They could have a certification before they receive their diploma.

Career training has to start earlier than age 18. Right now there Career Pathways Unit's only focus is youth 18 to 20. Their target group is youth who already have their GED or high school diploma. Career preparation must start while youth are still in high school for all students whether they plan to attend college or pursue vocational training. I understand that CFSA wants to ensure that youth in high school are focusing on their education so that they can graduate and hopefully enter college but even the youth who go to college need much more than grades to prepare for post-secondary education. They need assistance and support with obtaining internships and externships. They need to know what careers are out there and what the paths leads to these careers. Colleges and universities are looking for students with interesting experiences in addition to good grades.

By age 18 youth should already have a foundation. We cannot expect they will miraculously develop these important skills in a few short weeks. For most of the youth the only job they have had was during the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). During this short summer term they are not receiving the needed training to become consistent and responsible employees. The Department of Employment Services (DOES) does not provide any meaningful work readiness training. The development of positive work habits and standards should start at age 15 or 16. This way when youth are 18 or 19 they are simply sharpening and improving these habits.

A "no youth can hide" approach must be taken in providing employment services. OYE staff must become more aggressive in locating and engaging youth in their employment programming. Youth who are disconnected can be difficult to engage but the stakes are high. Failure at reaching and engaging them will mean that these youth will become a part of a permanent underclass. They won't have any education or the skills to hold a job. They will fall directly into poverty or the foster care to prison pipeline because their only means of supporting themselves will be through government assistance or through the underground economy.

Thank you for your time and attention.