

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

**Marcia N. Huff  
Senior Manager of the Foster Care Campaign at the Young Women's Project**

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Good afternoon Chairman Alexander and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I am Marcia Huff, Senior Manager of the Foster Care Campaign at the Young Women's Project. We are a DC-based nonprofit organization that builds the leadership and power of DC youth so that they can lead campaigns to improve youth-serving institutions. The Foster Care Campaign (FCC) trains more than 30 foster youth leaders each year who work as advocates and organizers to improve the lives of their peers through advocacy, education, and policy work. During the summer of 2014 we expanded our team to include emancipated and homeless youth in response to the rising numbers of our own youth who due to family hardship, emancipation, and aging out of the foster care system have become homeless.

FCC work is focused on the development and needs of older youth ages 16-24. These youth make up close to half of the out-of-home foster population. Since starting at YWP in 2012 I have made contact with approximately 200 foster and homeless youth. Our team has hired close to fifty youth. As of September 2014 there were 492 youth ages 15-20 under the care of CFSA. Approximately 100 of these youth live in group settings such as group homes, residential treatment facilities and independent living programs. The remainder live with foster families or are placed in the care of family members.

I am here to ask for your support and leadership for three important initiatives that will greatly improve the lives of current and emancipated foster youth.

1. The first is the development of a Young Adult Support Center (YASC) for young adults living in the District. This center will be a one-stop center run by both adults and youth; where youth will receive support in the areas of employment, education and health and wellness. This will be a home for the foster youth aftercare services program. I am also asking for \$110,208 be allocated for transportation assistance for youth who age out of the system at age-out of the system as 21 to receive until the age of 22. The YASC and transportation support will greatly improve the lives of young adults age 16-24 living in the District and we need your leadership and support in making these two things a reality. The two young people testifying before you today represent tens of thousands of other youth, many former foster youth who need your support and investment.
2. Transportation assistance for foster your who emancipate at age 21 until age 22.
3. Support funding for community schools

**The Struggles of Older & Recently Emancipated Foster Youth**

Too many youth age-out of foster care at age twenty-one without the skills or support to live healthy, happy and successful lives. The fortunate exit care and have the support of their families or the continued support of a foster family. The majority of these youth lack

the knowledge, skills and ability to obtain living wage jobs, find apartments and matriculate through post-secondary education programs.

**The CFSA Aftercare Program is ineffective in support youth after they exit foster care at age twenty-one.** Youth who emancipate from foster care receive aftercare services the DC Health Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives or Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) for DC. Youth receive either case worker or CASA volunteer who is supposed to provide support until their twenty-third birthday. Collaborative workers and CASA volunteers lack training and resources necessary to support youth in finding housing, enrolling in college or post-secondary educational programs or find employment. Case management is not the best means for providing aftercare services to youth—group trainings and interventions are more effective.

### **Employment**

In FY2014 37 (or 30%) of the 123 youth who aged out of care were employed. The majority of these 37 youth were working minimum wages positions. The remaining 86 were listed as not working for an array of reasons. A few examples--7 were in college; 19 were listed as disabled and connected with the Department of Disability Services; and others were pregnant or new mothers. Only 8 were listed as “not-engaged.” All of these youth need specialized and intensive career development support. Youth need more than emails with job opening and assistance with crafting resumes and cover letters. Youth need training to build skills necessary to live successful independent lives. They need training in vital soft-skills like effective communication, problem solving, conflict resolution and critical thinking.

### **Education**

Foster youth entering college lack the support to succeed and graduate on time and there are hundreds who lack the support to even navigate the application and financial aid process. A 2010 study by the University of Chicago found that only six percent of former foster youth had earned a two or four year degree by the age of twenty-four,. Foster youth face numerous challenges when trying to enter college such as: lack of money, not knowing how to navigate the application and financial aid process; lack of adults support; and many do not see themselves as “college material.”

The small number who are able to apply and enroll face additional barriers. Many face significant academic and life-skill challenges. CFSA lacks programming to support youth in building these necessary skills. In FY2014 only thirty-five youth participated in OYE's pre-college services. These services must go deeper than college tours and seminars on financial aid. A significant number of youth have to take remedial classes costing them additional money and reducing their likelihood of graduating. One young woman attending Trinity Washington University had to take seven remedial classes costing her over \$15,000. These classes do not count toward her degree. She will not graduate on-time. Youth need intensive academic interventions and support reducing the number of remedial classes youth have to take and increasing the likelihood that they will graduate on-time.

### **Transportation**

Recently emancipated youth struggle to pay for transportation. A small number of youth who emancipate are able to receive assistance from their families but the majority of youth do not have family members or other who are able to assist with transportation costs. This lack is a major barrier and places an additional burden on youth who are already struggling to maintain employment; locate housing; and participate in educational and vocational programs. In FY14 only 30% of youth who emancipated were employed leaving the remainder with no income to pay for transportation.

Many of the youth who are employed are working low wage or minimum wage positions. Sixty-three percent of the foster youth who were employed during FY14 were working food service or retail positions where they made the minimum wage of \$9.50/hour. I will make the assumption that most of these youth are not working full time. The result is a young person whose costs of traveling to and from work nearly match their take-home pay. I have seen this first hand. One young lady on our staff found a job doing housekeeping at a hotel in Bethesda. The money she made barely provided enough money to pay for her commute. Another recently emancipated youth on our staff has to regularly receive advances on her pay or assistance through petty cash just so that she will have enough money to return to the shelter where she is living. This is a typical situation considering the majority of youth who emancipate from care will live in Ward 7 or 8 and have to commute west of the Anacostia or two Northern Virginia or further for work.

#### **Recommendation 1: Establish a Young Adults Support Center (YASC)**

The YASC would provide aftercare services to emancipated youth until they reach the age of twenty-four. This would be for one year longer than youth currently receive these services. Youth would also connect with the YASC while they are still in care ensuring a seamless transition. The YASC would support emancipated youth in the areas of education, employment and housing. YASC staff would also connect youth to community resources for government benefits, clothing, food, child care, health care, and counseling. These services would be provided through individual coaching/advising/case-management and group training.

**Education.** Youth would receive assistance applying to enrolling in and preparing for college or other post-secondary education or training programs. They would also receive support finding and applying for financial resources to pay for their education such as DC TAG, government grants and scholarships.

**Employment.** Emancipated youth would receive support reaching their employment goals. YAS staff would help youth career plan, apply to jobs and find vocational training and certification programs.

**Housing.** YAS would also assist emancipated youth who lack stable and consistent housing by helping them get into local housing programs (shelters, independent living programs and public housing), apply for Rapid Housing support, and navigate the complex real estate market.

Emancipated youth would not only receive support in finding a job, housing and enrolling in school but they would also participate in group life/soft-skills training sessions that would prepare them for educational and employment success. The YAS would provide the

type of holistic services that are necessary for youth to become healthy and flourishing District residents. YASC would be an important part of the continuum of services that Mayor Bowser declared necessary for traveling on the path to the middle class.

**Recommendation 2: Allocate \$120,048 in the CFSA budget so that youth who age-out at twenty-one can receive transportation assistance until their 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday**

Youth who emancipate from foster care at age twenty-one should be eligible to receive transportation assistance until their 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. These youth should be rolled into the existing foster youth transportation subsidy program. These funds should be provided through the Office of Youth Empowerment or through the proposed Young Adults Support Center. This assistance would be for the purpose of employment (including job searching) or education (college, vocational training, certification programs, etc.). Active participation in the aftercare program would be a requirement for receiving this assistance.

In FY14 123 youth emancipated from foster care. Here is a rough estimate of what providing this transportation might cost:

*\*\*Numbers based on approximately half residing in MD/VA.*

Location	# Of Youth ages eligible	Monthly Travel Stipend Amount	Monthly Cost	Annual Cost
Youth Living In DC	61	Unlimited Monthly Pass (\$64)	\$3,904	\$46,848
Youth Living in MD & VA	61	\$100 monthly support	\$6,100	\$73,200
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>\$10,004</b>	<b>\$120,048</b>

**Recommendation 3**

**Expand the DC Community School Initiative to include more schools and more focus on the needs of homeless and foster youth.** For youth who do not have families to fall back on, a strong educational foundation that prepares youth for college and work is essential to their survival. Yet majority of these youth are not succeeding in the education system and their numbers grow every year as more and more families sink into poverty, poor health, and prison. Homeless, foster, and at-risk youth are much more likely to be truant, have system conflict, drop out of school, and have lower academic performance. They have a broad range of needs that include more academic support– through more and more rigorous AP classes, tutors, help applying to college, math and writing labs to more after school sports and other activities, better food, help finding jobs. But they also need a place to do homework, or wash clothes, use working computers, grab a healthy snack, or just make a call. Addressing these problems requires a different level of educational engagement and intervention which is not happening in most public schools.

As an organization who has spent 20 years working closely with schools through after school programming and in with at-risk youth struggling to make the public education system work for them – we believe that Community Schools could be a powerful source of development and support to the 24,000 students in DC Public Schools (DCPS) and 17,000 students in public charter schools who are considered at-risk. Community Schools is a proven, research-based, best-practice focused strategy that organizes school and community resources around student success and offer a range of programs including intensive academic programming, school

enrichment, workforce readiness, mental health, and other services, facilitating partnerships between schools, community organizations and businesses. High quality community schools can address both the academic and support needs of at-risk youth, providing individual interventions as well as group enrichment programming. This work is scalable and can be increased over time, as individual models are tested, evaluated, and ready for replication. The work is lead and staffed by nonprofits (which tend to be cheaper than DCPS staffed work) and promise to bring new resources, volunteers, and services into the school.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions.