

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

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Good Morning Chair Alexander and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Marcia Huff. I am the Director of Youth Poverty Programs at the Young Women's Project (YWP). I am testifying today on behalf of YWP. We are a DC based nonprofit organization that builds the leadership and power of young people so that they can shape DC policies and institutions to expand rights and opportunities for DC youth. Since 1994, YWP has developed thousands of youth leaders and has worked in partnership with a number of DC agencies to develop policy and implement programs in sexual health education and services, foster care rights and opportunities, youth employment, and other issues. YWP programs cover a broad range of interventions -- from after school leadership programming to youth employment, peer education, youth-led research, and policy development.

The youth who you met here today are part of our Foster Care Campaign (FCC) which includes more than 30 leaders who are in care or recently aged out. They work as advocates, researchers, and bloggers to improve the lives of their peers by raising awareness, assessing youth services, and developing supportive policies. This year, FCC staff conducted research on youth serving nonprofits and DOES's Office of Youth Programs, completed several blogs and a series on government leaders, and worked with CFSA as part of a Youth Working Group that provided input on the restructuring of the aftercare program. We really appreciate the leadership of Debra Porcia-Usher and Wendy Jacobson for this work and CFSA's willingness to take it on. Recently, FCC launched a team who will provide sexual health education, condoms, and clinic referrals to older youth.

YWP also runs the Peer Health and Sexuality Education (PHASE) Program that works to improve DC teens' reproductive health by expanding comprehensive sexuality education, ensuring access to community and school based reproductive health care, and engaging teen women and men as peer educators and decision makers on reproductive health issues. Thanks to your support, this work has expanded in the past year to include more than 200 youth educators since July. Youth educators who work in partnership with DC Public Schools and the Department of Health (DOH) to improve sexual health outcomes for DC youth through peer education, condom distribution, and by expanding sexual health education. So far this year, YHEP educators conducted 15,374 educational interventions, made 370 clinic referrals, and distributed 51,916 condoms and dental dams. They also trained 150 health teachers, collected data from more than 500 youth on health, violence, education, and other issues, cultivated more than 200 relationships with administrators and teachers in DC public and charter schools, provided youth outreach for school-based STI-HIV testing, made significant contributions to the DC Health Education Standards, and presented more than 40 testimonies to five Council Committees.

My testimony today will focus the CFSA aftercare program and the need for better quality services and programming for recently emancipated youth.

Since 2012, I have worked with over 250 foster, under-resourced and homeless youth. The FCC hired close to 50. A quarter of these youth are former foster youth who went into guardianship, returned to their families or aged out of care. We currently have four youth on staff who are in the CFSA aftercare program.

Older youth and young adults in foster care lack the capacity for a successful transition into “adulthood” and immediate reform to the aftercare program is necessary. There are 458 youth and young adults aged 14-20 in foster care; 226 are 18-20 years old (21% of youth in care) with 95 youth aging out last year. Youth emancipating from care face significant barriers. At the time they aged out, only a third were employed: 21 percent full-time and 9 percent part-time. Eight of these youth were in college and eleven were working toward their high school diploma or GED. Youth attending college struggle to complete their degrees. Most are not prepared for the academic rigor and struggle with adjusting to college life. Nearly half of the youth attending college in the past year dropped out. Without intensive interventions, these young people are likely to be doomed to a life of poverty.

Aftercare Program

CFSA provides aftercare services to youth who exit care at the age of 21. They receive services for two years until the age of 23. The program seeks to address the barriers experienced by youth that prevent them from successfully transitioning into adulthood. Youth are supposed to receive support in the areas of education, employment and housing. Aftercare program staff also take on the role of caring adults who support youth as they adjust to life post care.

For the past 13 years, the Aftercare Program has been run by the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives (Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative, East of the River Family Strengthening Collaborative, Georgia Avenue Family Strengthening Collaborative and Collaborative Solutions for Communities). In FY15 the Collaboratives enrolled 99 young adults in the aftercare program. The Collaboratives do not actually provide any training or services themselves but instead refer young people out to other programs for housing, training, employment, etc. In FY2015, the Collaboratives reported that 83 young people were engaged in case management services. DC Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) provided aftercare services for 30 youth in FY15 but CFSA ended their contract in FY16 and all youth enrolled were transferred to the Collaboratives.

As far as we can tell, the current Collaborative-run aftercare program works like this youth are assigned a case worker through one of the Collaboratives a short time before they exit care. The case worker who meets with them to create an individualized goal plan. The worker is then supposed to support the youth in achieving their goals—mostly in the areas of employment, housing and education. The workers provide referrals if needed and might assist youth with obtaining government benefits such as SNAP. The case workers also send out job announcements and notify the youth about relevant governmental or community programs and services. Case workers also provide transportation support on an emergency basis and connect youth to community resources for food and clothing if needed.

Unfortunately, youth are not being adequately supported and served through the aftercare program. YWP youth and adults have been testifying on the poor quality of CFSA Aftercare programming for the past ten years. Youth report that the aftercare services are often inflexible, unreliable, and ineffective. Youth desire more time, assistance and sense of urgency in the delivery of the services. Youth staff testified on several problems including: not being able to reach their workers for long periods of time; lack of emergency support for items such as food, clothing or transportation; never being offered any useful resources for employment; workers who did not have any knowledge of community resources or programs; and having their aftercare services terminated after a being out of contact with their worker for a period of time.

Last summer, our youth research team conducted a spy call study to assess DC youth services in education, housing, and employment, and aftercare. These organizations collectively hold more than \$80 million in government contracts, much of it for youth services. Youth researchers made more than 200 calls to 20 youth-serving nonprofits, posing as themselves with adult staff listening in on speaker phone, to seek services in 84 percent of the calls – youth were not able to identify a service or a referral. Youth talked with staff 106 times and left 82 messages, 8 of which were returned: 11 referrals and 17 service leads were offered. YWP included the Collaboratives as part of this study. Out of a total of 46 calls to five Collaboratives, three services were offered (all youth employment) and two blind referrals were made. We left 24 messages: three were returned. None of the staff members answering the phone offered youth services or collecting information from the youth on their needs. Some said that they didn't have any youth programs or served youth only in certain zip codes.

In the past three years have we witnessed youth who were within 30 days of exit and they didn't know if they were assigned to a Collaborative or DC CASA. One such youth was a young woman who is in college. She discovered weeks before emancipation that she was never provided vital information regarding her transition from care. It was only because of a session we had that she realized she had been in the dark. She hadn't even heard of the "aftercare program" or a collaborative worker. She was shocked, scared and stressed because she was not prepared to exit care. In the past three years I have known too many other young people in a similar situation.

Thankfully it seems as though change is on the horizon. We are pleased that Director Davidson is committed to restructuring aftercare services. Last year CFSA hired an outside consultant and embarked upon an initiative to evaluate and improve the aftercare program. Our organization was actively involved in the process. YWP was part of a working group who met several times to assess current programming, review best practices and model programs, identify youth benchmarks, and identify important program design elements. YWP was honored to be able to lead the youth portion of the aftercare working Group. Youth offered substantial input into program design and benchmarks. We are pleased with the recommendations that emerged from this process. If these recommendations are taken, then the quality of the aftercare program will increase dramatically. The recommendations represent an important shift from weak and ineffective case management to intensive youth engagement and capacity building.

One major issue is that there need to be a shift in approach to older youth services while youth are still in care. Based on the new plan, older youth programming within CFSA will focus on increasing youth capacity for a healthy transition into adulthood using a designated set of outcomes and benchmarks which will help align the current disjointed transition process. Right now, too many youth exit care not

knowing what services and supports they are entitled in the aftercare program. CFSA uses the Foster Club Transition Toolkit to guide the transition process but this too is only effective if youth are engaged, developed and supported. The toolkit is really a checklist of items that need to happen. Transition planning will be outcome driven and designed with youth capacity building as the focal point, supported by the team meetings.

Youth need to be referred to aftercare services earlier than age 20. In FY15 the majority (75%) of youth were referred to aftercare services within 6 months or less of turning 19 ½. Twenty-three or a third of youth were referred within one months of turning 19 ½. A well planned warm handoff is essential so that youth are familiar with the aftercare providers and are able establish a relationship well before their exit from care.

Aftercare Recommendations:

- **We urge CFSA to adopt the recommendations that were included in the report submitted by the consultant:**
 - **Aftercare Leadership:** Designate a person who is in charge of the after program and create a staffing infrastructure to deliver the active support and oversight needed
 - **Establish Outcomes:** CFSA should adopt the comprehensive outcome measures developed by the aftercare workgroup that reflect both stability and adult competency goals for youth and young adults ages 14-25.
 - **Adopt New Program Model:** Aftercare program should be run using a positive youth development model with a youth partnership approach.
 - **Ensure Strong Intra-Agency Transitions and Communication:** Improve communications and connections--social worker to social worker; and social worker to youth. This is key to supporting youth during key transitions, including the transition from foster care to independent adulthood.
 - **Start Transition Work Earlier:** Youth should start actively planning for transitioning out of care at age 14. Regardless of a youth's permanency goal they should work on building the necessary skills for the successful transition to adulthood.

- We strongly urge CFSA to press forward with their plans to overhaul the aftercare program and make changes on some things immediately--such as appointing one person who is in charge of the program and provides oversight.

- Aftercare services should also be extended for two additional years until youth reach the age of 25.

Transportation is a major issue for youth after they exit care. So few are employed and the majority of those who are employed are making minimum wage. Youth often are unable to afford train and bus fare so that they can travel to work, school, job interviews or appointments. The lack of access to transportation places an additional burden on youth who are already struggling. Many youth risk being arrested by sneaking onto trains and buses so that they can travel to work or go to appointments.

For years we advocated for transportation assistance for youth in the aftercare program and we were pleased to find out that starting the second quarter of FY16 youth who are actively engaged with the aftercare program and who complete their aftercare plans will be

allocated \$100 per month in travel support. We are especially happy to hear of this change because two of the youth connected with our program who received assistance in the amount of \$100 last year were told by their Collaborative workers that this money would no longer be provided because the funding had been pulled.

Post- Emancipation Housing

Lack of housing is a major issue for youth aging out of care. Due to a serious lack of affordable housing in DC, even youth who are working full-time are very unlikely to rent their own apartment without a subsidized rental assistance program. The average cost of a one-bedroom is nearly \$2,000 a month. In FY15 28 young adults who were transitioning out of care received assistance through the Rapid Housing program. Youth received an average of \$4,051 (or \$337 a month). Even with this assistance finding an affordable place is difficult.

Many youth are forced to "couch-surf" with family or friends. This might mean living in unstable and volatile homes that they were removed from years before. Many of these homes are already bursting at the seams with multiple family members sharing a small space. Youth who lack stable family ties face especially uncertain housing options and many are forced to stay in shelters. Youth attending college and living in dorms (FY15 there were 6) face the stress of finding a place to stay during holidays and school breaks.

In the past year CFSA moved to address the housing needs of youth transitioning out of care by opening the Wayne Place Housing program. The twenty housing slots significantly increase the housing options for youth leaving care. The project seemed like an opportunity for youth to have their own apartments and continue to ease into independent adulthood with needed supports for employment, education and mental health.

Wayne Place is a joint effort between CFSA and the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) with the Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative handling the day-to-day administration of the program. The residents are a mix of young people who have exited the foster care system or youth transitioning from psychiatric residential centers and require intensive services to stabilize them in the community. Wayne Place uses the "Transition to Independence" or TIP model approach. This approach incorporates educational and employment preparation and support services. There is a capacity of 40 youth and approximately half of the slots are for youth exiting foster care. Youth are able to live at Wayne Place for 18-24 months.

YWP has worked with three youth who have been a part of this housing experiment. Based on our advocacy with these youth, we have concerns about the program management, support services, and security issues. Residents have reported incidents of sexual harassment and various other safety issues, a lack of staff support, and overly strict rules. Residents also report that staff members lack the skills and disposition to serve young adults dealing with life challenges. Many seem to be dealing with their own issues and often lack professionalism.

Staff from CFSA and DBH have been hosting monthly workgroups where agency staff, representatives from the Collaborative and community stakeholders discuss program progress and operations, resident concerns, and plan for future activities. This group is

dedicated to examining the first year of operations and making recommendations for improving the program. They have also been extremely responsive to resident issues that we have elevated-responding and addressing issues immediately.

In addition to our concerns about resident safety we are extremely concerned that the program lacks a clear set of benchmarks, goals and outcomes that guide programming. Many of the goals are stated as in the general terms of wanting youth to be employed, healthy and independent. The time that youth spend there is extremely valuable and cannot be wasted.

Post-Emancipation Housing Recommendations

- **Work with DBH to improve and revamp the Wayne Place Program to include the outcomes and milestone identified through the aftercare workgroup and update the statement of work to reflect the changes.**
- **CFSA should revise the employment qualifying requirement for Rapid Housing funds the first year out of care.** Youth would be able to qualify for RH if they were actively engaged in the aftercare program and actively seeking employment or in school full-time.
- **Allow youth to receive RH for additional time if they meet eligibility requirements.** Youth who are attending a college or university full time would be eligible to receive funds until the age of 25.
- **Increase the amount of RH funds that youth can receive.** Youth would be eligible to receive up to \$800 a month (or \$9,600 a year) in RH. Increasing the award amount would expand the housing options available.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions and serve as a resource to the Committee in any way.