

**Testimony to the Committee on Human Services****For the Budget Oversight Hearing on the Child and Family Services Agency****Mary Hicks-Pope****Foster Care Campaign Staff, Young Women's Project****April 24, 2013**

Hello everyone my name is Mary Hicks-Pope. It's an honor to come before you today. I am 19 years old and I work with the Young Woman's Project. I currently live with the Latin American Youth Center Independent Living Program in Columbia Heights. Today I will be speaking about the new Independent Living Stipend levels that CFSA is proposing.

As you may know, current Chapter 63 ILP regulations require that youth in ILP programs be given \$520 a month. CFSA's new guidelines raise that stipend to \$538 per month. I've been working with a team of youth who have analyzed this proposal and developed an alternative budget. We think that the level is way too low and does not provide enough money to buy nutritious food, save money, keep a phone, or access the internet. Director Donald has agreed to meet with us and to consider an increase. We are asking that you support our recommendation to raise the stipend level so that all youth will have at least \$938 a month (including public transportation funding of \$200 and mandatory savings of \$100).

When I found out that I was on the path to move into ILP I began to think of how I was going to budget my money. I just moved into the ILP on April 15 and I'm already planning to take money from my paycheck to pay for things I should not have to pay for like my 60 dollar phone bill, internet access so I can stay in contact with my jobs, internships, social worker, and family, and a \$20 haircut every 2 weeks. What about when I need to go out of town to visit my family? It looks like cooking with fresh food is going to be very difficult. The stipend is not enough to cover much fruit or meat. I had to buy TV dinners just in case I ran out of food and I don't even like them. I don't have a lot of clothing so of course I wash and I don't have access to a washer and dryer – so that will be expensive. I work 36 hours a week which gives me a great amount of money to save but I won't be able to do so because I will constantly have to take out of my checking and savings. The budget is not suitable for a safe transition it's not teaching me how to save its making me think of other ways to get simple things, like tissue and napkins from McDonald's bathroom and I don't want to live like this. I want to

save \$1,000 a month so that I could have \$12,000 in a year, but the more I have to spend out of my pockets the less I'll be able to save.

**Recommendations:** The stipend team at YWP has spent the last couple months working on this issue. We reviewed the CFSA proposal, developed budgets, and collecting information about what food, clothes, and other supplies cost in DC. We have four recommendations:

- 1) **Work with youth to figure out and understand their real needs and expenses and what \$538 can really buy.** We are organizing a shopping trip for CFSA staff and we would like to invite you and your staff too –to see firsthand how you can stretch a \$500 budget to buy everything you need (including transportation) and still save money.
- 2) **Break the budget down into more specific categories that reflect youth needs and expenditures and that youth can use to budget each month.** Right now the stipend into three categories: food, clothes, and everything else.
- 3) **Require more from youth and give them an opportunity to learn about financial management!** Youth should not just be handed money each month. We should have to submit a monthly budget and track our expenses and be required to attend financial management trainings. Requiring youth to track expenses would also help CFSA flag youth who were not spending responsibly. Doing a monthly budget is beneficial to both. The youth do a get more organized and have to figure out what we do. It will help communicate to CFSA that this is really not enough money and they could flag people who are not spending in responsible ways. They should also track the big monthly expenses – phone bill, big purchases.
- 4) **Require youth who are working more than 10 hours a week to make contributions to their own living expenses.** The base stipend for youth who are working should be lower because they have another income source. Full time students (college and vocational) should be spending their time studying and in class and will need more stipend support form CFSA. It's not fair to punish them with a poverty level stipend.
- 5) **Increase the stipend to \$932 a month with \$100 a month going into an emancipation savings account.** When youth have jobs and earnings, then an even higher level of savings should be required.

- 6) **Pay out the stipends through direct deposit into savings accounts or through an EBT card (like the grandparent program).** This would also reduce funds lost to theft or check cashing expenses and help CFSA identify youth who were not spending responsibly.

**We are asking you, Chairman Graham, Councilmember Barry, and other Human Services Committee Members to support our stipend recommendation** of \$938 per youth, which will mean an additional \$336,000 in the ILP budget to cover 70 youth. This would make a huge difference in our lives and help to build a stronger ILP program. Thank you.