



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

**Nadia Gold-Moritz, Executive Director
Young Women's Project**

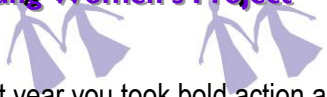
February 10, 2012

Good afternoon Chairman Graham and members of the Human Services Committee. I am Nadia Gold-Moritz Executive Director of the Young Women's Project (YWP) -- a multicultural organization that builds the leadership and power of DC youth so that they can lead campaigns to improve youth-serving institutions. The youth who you met here today are part of our Foster Care Campaign (FCC) which trains 30 foster youth leaders each year who work as advocates and organizers to improve the lives of their peers through research, training, and policy work. Thank you for creating such a welcoming space for them and for making the issues of older youth issues a priority today.

FCC's work is focused on the unmet needs of older youth -- who make up about half of the youth in care population. As of December 31, 2011, there were 908 youth ages 13-21 in CFSA's care. About 25 percent of these older youth reside in congregate care: 91 in group homes, 98 in Independent Living Programs, and 34 in Residential Treatment Centers. About 403 of these youth have the permanency goal of APPLA (Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement) which positions them to emancipate from foster care without a permanent legal relationship like guardianship, adoption, or reunification -- which for most of our youth translates into no home, no support network, and a life of poverty.

As you've heard today -- our youth continue to face major barriers in education, employment training and job placement, congregate care, and transitioning out of the child welfare system. CFSA's ongoing inability to meet the basic needs of this group is glaring evidence of its failure to meet its responsibilities to our children and to our city.

I am here today to talk about what we are seeing on the ground in these areas and what needs to happen to finally start making progress against these problems. There are a number of solutions that can be implemented quickly without additional funding -- that would have a significant and immediate impact on the lives of older youth. We are very encouraged that Brenda Donald is back at the helm of CFSA and are hopeful that with her commitment to older youth and her vision for change that we can make significant progress toward improving the lives of older youth in care. The Young Women's Project is eager to be a resource and a partner in this work.



Last year you took bold action and issued several directives that aimed to improve the lives of older youth through revising group home and ILP regulations, moving funding out of OYE and directing it toward community based youth development and educational programming for youth, creating better programming for young mothers, and establishing a review panel for the 2012 Youth Transition Services RFP process. One year later, based on the written responses to your oversight questions, CFSA has not made meaningful progress on any of these directives. It seems that there has been some planning, some meeting dates set, and even hundreds of hours of meetings and millions of dollars spent. But 908 older youth are not any closer to opportunity or long term survival.

And so we are asking for your leadership again by taking action on three critical issues for older youth.

Many foster youth are living in poverty – especially those in group homes and ILPs –without adequate food, clothing, or other essential supplies. Many are isolated in homes without transportation and cannot get to work, appointments, and other activities. They don't have access to computers or the educational support they need to be successful students. The persistent poor living conditions for the 220 youth in ILPs and group homes are evidenced by the high number of youth abscondances reported by CFSA in FY2011 (3,727) and in the first quarter of FY2012 (770).

Last year at our urging, you asked CFSA to revise the regulations. They drafted proposed rules to adopt a new chapter to Title 16 of the DCMR to establish a schedule of fines for violating to 29DCMR Chapter 63. We are glad that CFSA is finally taking steps to hold contractors accountable. But these changes do nothing to address the poverty conditions that are created when youth receive ILP stipends (about \$6,000 a year) that are little more than half of the poverty line (\$10,800).

We strongly urge you amend 29DCMR Chapters 62 and 63 in order to increase the level of direct financial support that youth in congregate care receive. Independent living stipends – which have not increased since 2001 -- should be increased from the current \$500 a month minimum to \$1,250 a month. For mothers, it needs to be increased to \$1,500 a month to afford adequate baby supplies. Group home allowance should be increased from the allowable minimum of \$1 to \$350. This would allow youth to buy adequate food, clothing, and transportation. This increase in financial support should also be used as an opportunity to encourage positive development by rewarding youth who attend school, get good grades, join leadership programs, and participate in other enrichment programs. We recommend mandatory savings of \$200 a month

for youth in ILPs and \$100 a month for youth in group homes to allow for a smoother transition out of care. We would even go a step farther and suggest amending the foster parent regulations to create a mandatory allowance and youth savings accounts. Some of the successful providers – like Family Matters—are already doing this on their own.

This will not require additional funding since contractors are already getting paid to provide adequate food, clothing, and care to youth. Although their contract amounts have been reduced in the past year, they continue to receive between \$58,000 (for ILP contractors) and \$91,000 (for teen bridge contractors) per year per teen. Youth stipends would require an additional \$6,000 per youth for ILP contractors and \$3,000 per youth for group home contractors each year. Money could be saved by reducing the staff ratio requirement (currently one staff person for every two youth) and lowering staff costs which consume the majority of ILP-group home contractor budgets. Here is the proposed monthly ILP stipend budget that our youth staff developed based on their needs and peer surveys:

| Spending Categories | Spending per month |
|---|---|
| Food: | (\$15 a day): \$450 a month |
| Public transportation: | (\$10 a day): \$300 |
| Cell phone: | \$50 |
| Clothing: | \$100 |
| House supplies: | \$25 |
| Hygiene supplies; grooming | \$50 |
| Emergency/medical: | \$25 |
| Recreational activities: | \$25 |
| School-Work supplies: | \$25 |
| Savings: | \$200 |
| Total monthly budget: 1,125 | \$1,250 |
| Additional baby expenses \$250 (\$1,375) | Diapers \$100 Food \$75 Clothing, supplies \$75 |

Youth are transitioning out of care and into homelessness, joblessness, and poverty at record rates.

During the past year, six of our youth transitioned out of care. None of them have jobs. Two are living with family. Two are homeless. And two are very close to becoming homeless if they don't find a job soon. All have Collaborative workers who do little else than make referrals as far as we can tell.

Meanwhile, according to CFSA's oversight responses, there is now more than \$2 million (up from \$500,000 last year) being given to five HFTC Collaboratives to provide Aftercare services to about 150 youth. This is a program that has failed to provide any evidence of progress or impact for the last 10 years. We still don't know what is actually being provided for that \$2 million. We know a lot about what is not being provided. There are no outcomes or targets or specific programs. There are no job training programs or computer rooms or stipends or food cards. There are not even any meetings or planning sessions. Youth come in and meet with staff or volunteers – who refer them to other organizations for services. The Collaborative's own report, included in the oversight materials, is evidence of their own ineffectiveness. Out of 37 youth referrals since October 2011, only 17 of those youth actually received some kind of services: nine have been labeled as unresponsive or unable to receive services and 11 are still being assessed. We don't know what kind of support the youth actually received and whether anyone actually got a job.

Youth transitioning into homelessness is not a problem that can be solved through case work. Youth do not need referrals. The solution is not to move more money to the same programs from the same contractors who have been failing youth for years – which is what we continue to do. Youth need real programs that provide real job training and connections to positions that pays a living wage. They need subsidized housing. They need a program that is going to make up for a decade of neglect and underdevelopment in the child welfare system.

The \$2 million in Aftercare dollars would be much better spent in the short term as part of rapid housing funds or to provide transportation tokens, food cards, and other immediate needs. In the long term -- \$2 million is enough to fund a state of the art transition center for youth aging out. There are many successful Transition Center models around the country that are making significant progress in these areas for foster youth. Many of them are run with budgets less than \$2 million. Most of them involve collaboration between government agencies and community-based nonprofits – who can usually do this round-the-clock whatever-it-takes work cheaper and with better outcomes.

There are a number of people in government and community groups coming together to take on the larger issue of disconnected youth. We are pleased that Councilmember Michael Brown is taking leadership in this area and that DOES is putting together a Disconnected Youth Pilot Program for 100 youth that includes job readiness training, stipends, apprenticeships, and connections to actual jobs. This model, if successful, could be expanded to include foster youth (who hopefully will be among the pilot group). This is where we should be putting our money.



To move CFSA in this direction, you directed the agency to establish a review panel for the 2012 Youth Transition Services RFP process. The panel will consist of representatives from non-contracting organizations to work in collaboration with the agency to review applicants and make award recommendations, monitor program work and outcomes, and evaluate programs to ensure effectiveness.” CFSA’s response was to put together an advisory board to provide best practices on youth service delivery and it includes only contractors who receive funding from CFSA, CFSA youth advisors, and agency representatives. This is not at all consistent with your directive.

We encourage CFSA to honor your directive and establish a real review panel that embodies a government-community partnership. And include panel members who know youth work and how to get successful outcomes (and better yet who are youth) and are not CFSA contractors and staff members who are the ones making money off of the current failing system. .

We’ve testified to this Committee for the past three years to support the creation of a community-based, adult-youth run DC Foster Youth Transition Center (YTC) that would provide intensive training and support services for youth ages 15-25 in a nurturing environment that offered a range of services and training in life skills, academic strengthening, employment preparation and placement, housing, health, and relationship building. Built on a foundation of youth development programming, the Center would provide:

- Aggressive educational interventions (including college preparation, enrollment, retention and identifying quality DC high schools) that allows us to increase the percentage of youth in college (from 8 to 40%) within five years
- Weekly group trainings for youth 15-17 that allow for peer-to-peer and interactive learning and build youth skills in self advocacy, leadership, health and wellness, and life skills.
- Comprehensive vocational training and tracking
- A range of viable housing options for youth transitioning out of care.
- Significant leadership, decision making, and staff roles for youth at the center
- Building an engaged network of community members-volunteers to provide mentoring, educational and vocational support to individual youth
- Building a committed network of businesses and educational institutions who will provide opportunities and support to youth transitioning out of care

- Ambitious outcomes and tracking for all of these areas
- Genuine commitment to youth by involving them on YTC staff and boards

Such a Center could be created and financially supported by consolidating several ineffective CFSA programs and contracts – mainly CKFL and the Collaborative Aftercare program and by using the \$3.2 million in federal Chafee funds and the Collaborative Aftercare Program contract.

As you heard today, foster youth experience a number of problems on a daily basis that would be addressed through a strong bill of rights. These problems include inadequate food and clothing, isolation from families and friends, lack of transportation, physically unsafe housing conditions, inadequate stipend levels, lack of educational tools and supports, and being denied access to family and siblings.

Right now – there is no one place where all youth rights – as they are stated in case law, CFSA policy, group home and ILP regulations and other places – are listed and explained. Youth don't know what they are entitled to so they can't self advocate. Adult advocates are also missing key information. For the few youth who do know their rights -- when there is a violation, there is no consistent, neutral place to report. Understanding and enforcing youth rights is an essential first step in improving their lives in the system.

Legislating a Youth Bill of Rights (YBR) is an opportunity to develop a foundational piece of work that can guide youth advocacy, services, and well being throughout the foster care system. The legislation would do two things: 1) Codify already existing youth rights (which are spread over hundreds of pages of federal and state regulations and law) and put them in one document; and 2) Codify CFSA Administrative Issuances by that relate to core youth right areas.

For youth, a YBR would provide a foothold for self advocacy in education, housing, privacy, basic needs (like food and clothing), and care giver responsiveness. For social workers, GALs, foster parents, and other care givers, it would provide an education tool to understand youth rights and responsibilities. These rights would help hold CFSA staff and contractors accountable for youth-well being and raise awareness about youth challenges and needs.

Several states already have YBRs for foster youth – so there is plenty of state-level precedent. Although CFSA developed a Youth Bill of Rights, which is currently posted on their website, this document does not actually include the full range of youth rights that are currently identified in 29 DCMR and so is misleading to youth and staff.

After reviewing federal and state child welfare law and CFSA Administrative Issuances, we've identified the following options in moving forward with this legislation. Both options would accomplish the same end result:

Option 1: Introduce a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to amend 29 DCMR Chapters 60, 62, and 63 (Foster Homes; Youth Shelters, Runaway Shelters, Emergency Care Facilities, and Youth Group Homes; and Independent Living Programs for Adolescents and Young Adults respectively). Each of these Chapters already has a Section dedicated to Youth Rights and Responsibilities; however, there are several additional rights afforded to youth in federal legislation, CFSA Administrative Issuances, and other Sections of each Chapter that are not listed. Revising the Sections of Title 29 would codify the YBR within the DCMR in one place. It would also expand the current rights by elevating the administrative issuances into law.

Option 2: Introduce a bill specifying each right (including the current rights named in 29 DCMR and CFSA Administrative Issuances), and direct CFSA to inform youth of their rights upon entrance to the child welfare system, produce copies of the YBR for each youth currently in foster care, and provide training to social workers and other affected staff. Group homes and independent living programs are already required to post youth rights and responsibilities at their facilities. They would just be required to post the updated version.

We hope you will continue to work with us to move these initiatives forward. The YWP staff has compiled research, policy, legislation, and best practices in all of these areas and would be happy to serve as a resource to you and your staff. Thank you for your commitment to older youth and for listening to my testimony.