



**Testimony to the Committee on Human Services
On the Foster Youth Rights Amendment Act of 2012**

**Nakea Paige
Foster Care Campaign Youth Staff, Young Women's Project**

July 11, 2012

Good afternoon Chairman Graham and other Councilmembers. My name is Nakea Paige. I am a 20 year old foster youth who has been in care for 6 years. I am also a college student and will be entering my third year of college at the University of Maryland, College Park majoring in Journalism with a focus on Photography. I am a Program Specialist for the Young Women's Project's Foster Care Campaign and have been working there for 6 years.

I am here today to talk about my past experiences when it came to my knowing my rights as a foster youth in the system. While things are fine now, they have not always been this good and it took a lot of self advocacy in order for me to get to the point where I am right now. That's why I am here to support the Foster Youth Rights Amendment Act of 2012.

My 6 years in the foster care system have consisted of many ups and downs. I have always managed to stay positive and made sure that things are going good and the way that I want them to be for me. While I live in a great foster home now, I have lived in a group home and a foster home that consistently violated my rights not only as a foster youth but as a person in general.

For instance, while living in the group home, we never had 3 meals a day, the house was always infested with some sort of rodent or insect, we had no privacy whether it was in our rooms or on the phone, staff was always disrespectful, our allowance was always close to nothing, and a host of other issues. After staying in the group home for less than a year, I decided that type of living situation was not the best for me, so I told my social worker, GAL, and my judge that I was ready to move to a foster home. I feel that if I would have known that I was entitled to the right to privacy, adequate meals, and a clean living space, things would have been easier not only for me but for the other youth that I was living with. There were so many altercations amongst youth and staff about what was right and what was wrong, and I feel that if we were given these rights there would not have been as many disagreements as there were when it came down to what was right and what was wrong.

When I moved to my first foster home things were fine at first and then money and respect became an issue. I was never given an allowance, transportation, or the resources that I should have had as far as school, employment, or

mental health. If I knew that I would have experienced similar issues I would have just stayed in the group home. When my foster mother found out that she would not be getting as much money for me to stay with her she started to treat me like I was just a check. We always argued and then she put in a 30 day notice without me even knowing. I feel like if I was aware of my rights, things would have been set in stone before I moved in and things would not have been as bad as they were.

While living in this one foster home for about a year and a half I had 4 different social workers and only one of them actually did her job. When I first moved there I had a social worker whom I did not meet until a week before she was leaving the company. Then I did not have a social worker for 3 months. After that I had another social worker who I did not get along with. Each of these social workers never returned my phone calls nor made themselves known until it was time to go to court. I then had another social worker who did everything that she was supposed to do and more when it came down to getting the things that I needed. Not having a social worker, or a bad one, made things harder for me to have my needs met. I also feel like if I knew that my social worker was supposed to contact me more than once a month things would not have gotten so bad so fast.

When it was time for me to graduate from high school things started to become a bit hectic because of the school I wanted to go to and the funding. Luckily I knew about all of the money that I should be getting for higher education because things were a bit troublesome when I went into my first year in college. There was a constant battle between myself and my workers about the expense of Michigan State University; however I knew that the money I would have been getting from CFSA and OYE would have sufficed. There was a hold on my account because the people at both OYE and CFSA had not sent the money that was for my tuition and room and board until the end of the semester. I reported this to my judge and things were taken care of as they should have been. While my education experience has gone well, I know some people who have dropped out of college because they were not getting their money on time or not at all. The Foster Youth Rights Amendment Act would be a good way to let youth know that they are entitled to funding for secondary and higher education. I feel that if youth knew these rights, then more of them would be able to not only graduate high school, but college as well.

I was always one to be independent. If there was something that I felt I needed or was best for me, I have always worked hard to attain it. I vocalized every issue and made sure it was fixed. I wished that things would have been easier for me the first two years of my living in the system. I honestly feel like if I had some sort of guide to know the things I had the right to and the rules that should have been followed things would have been as good then as they are now.

The Foster Youth Rights Amendment Act of 2012 will help youth, especially older youth, who are entering care be able to navigate their way through the system and be able to be independent. Youth knowing their rights while in care is the most important thing because it will allow them to understand life when they age out and prepare them for the aging out process earlier.

I have been a part of trying to get something like this passed for about 2 years now. I really believe that if youth know their rights when they first enter the system they will be able to know what they want and need and be able to attain it. I encourage you to pass the bill and for youth to take the time to read it so that they are able to succeed in the system and transition out in the right way. Thank you for your time.