

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

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Good afternoon Council member Graham and other council members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Nataly Ann Del Valle. I am 18 years of age and attend Maya Angelou Public Charter High School as a senior. I live in a foster home. I have been in the system for the past 5 years and I am a member of the Foster Care Campaign staff. I advocate on the current and past issues I have faced and work with others to hopefully lead to a change in foster care. There are several issues that I would like to bring to your attention.

To begin with, there is too much effort put into removing and not enough into reunification. This is the issue that has had the biggest impact on me. I was better off living with my mom than in care. Worse things have happened to me in care than ever happened to me at home. I never went without clothes or food. I had home cooked meals every night. My mom and I are workable if someone would have given us the chance and proper guidance to work together. I was rebellious. My mom did everything in the book to get me to cooperate. Because my mom could not provide her mental records they requested, the system changed my reunification goal to APPLA. If the people could have put that effort into helping us stay together rather than removing, I would have been one less child in care. I would've not grown with so many questions in my head about how much time of my youth years I could've spent with her happy and focused on what the majority of teenagers my age should be. Now the important years of my life--boys, sex, peer pressure—are gone. We missed out on that big part of our lives together. At this point, it makes sense for me to stay in the system. I know what I want to do. I am preparing for college, putting together my financial aid, and I even have a scholarship in place. I'd like to apply for the ETV. Now I use my experience and pain towards a better future. For me I believe everything happen for a reason and I am the voice for the forgotten. *All the time, effort, and money that go into keeping the youth in care would actually make a better world if CFSA taught the youth how to make it work. Life isn't easy. Help families work through issues and the youth learn how to work with their families. The grass is not always greener, I am a living witness.*

Another concern of mine is the overmedicated and misdiagnosed: The system put me on medication that I didn't need. When I was part of DYRS they diagnosed me as bipolar and depressed. They started me on 50 milligrams and increased my dose to 250 milligrams of sera quill—which did nothing but knock me out every time I

took it. My problems were still there. I stopped on my own. My mom was my main encouragement. Anyone removed from their home is going to be depressed and not able to perform in life accurately. The psychiatrist should not make youth rely on a pill for a life problem. I have a friend who they diagnosed as mentally retarded. She's not. She just has not finished school. I bet most of the kids in care have been diagnosed inaccurate and this is a form of making us depend on the system. I don't take any medication now and I don't have any problems. However -- having the label of a mental disorder was hard on my self-esteem down.

CFSA should drugs as a last resort -- not the first option. Make sure staff are trained to work with youth and avoid drugs. Properly trained staff will decrease the number of youth on medicine.

Most of the youth I know are in foster home placements with adults who do not treat them very well. I am currently placed in a foster home although I am not there much. I've experienced a lot of problems in this home. My foster mom used to have three foster kids plus grand kids and she is also a respite house which means we have people coming in for a couple of days at a time who we don't know. A respite girl came from residential. She took oil and grease and threw it everywhere. I told her. If you are mean to these kids -- someone is going to give it to you. Ms. Paula hit her with a bike pump. Other girls come through and they steal or fight. Their mentality is not ready for a home setting. I had a lot of stuff stolen that was never replaced. It's not safe. I am trying to get into Catholic Charities now and CFSA is moving me to a different agency.

My idea of a good foster parent is having someone to stick up for you and support you through all the difficult situations. None of my foster parents did this. Here are some examples:

- On the year anniversary of my boyfriend's death, I didn't want to go to school on the anniversary. I couldn't handle the fact of having to write the date down and be around others. I needed to be at home where I could grieve. So I came home. I called my foster mom to get me out of school. She told them keep me in the school. I left anyway. She would not let me go in the house and called the police and told them I'm supposed to be in school. I go to school every day. I am on honor roll. I am asking for one day, for some support and love and I didn't get it.
- Another time I just got my wisdom teeth pulled out and I was sick. I went to the nurse who called my foster mom to get me. She told her to keep me in school.

- When I got my first charge it was a misdemeanor. Because I had no parent representation they took me to the maximum consequence. They committed me because I was in care and I had no family representation. All I did was steal soap and deodorant from target because my group home at that time was not meeting my needs. I gave them back the merchandise. The other girl was released because her mom came to get her. They kept me in custody until the police came to get me. The group home staff never came to get me. I spent many nights in YSC because I didn't have a home "home" and that was the safest place to keep me until my workers found me another foster home.

There has been many times where I've been stranded without a way to get home. I live in Maryland and I get to school in DC by using my student pass. A monthly pass does not work in Maryland so I have to stop at the Naylor Road Station. How am I supposed to get home? At first, my foster mom would not pick me up. Then I went to my social worker over and over again and my foster mom finally started to cooperate. But it took a long time to fix the problem. The social workers are scared of the foster parents. AFTER 3 yrs of being there I still have to remind her about the monthly pass every month, and other little things. If I wasn't the young advocator like I am I would be taken advantage of on the things that are there for me but foster parents try to keep from us.

Clothing has always been a struggle. I need clothing now because my stomach is growing but I haven't gotten any. My pants are open. I have to buy everything with the \$140 allowance I get each month – but instead I choose to save it. I always have to nag my foster mother for things I need and give an explanation. It's exhausting and it makes me want to stop communicating. I am an honor roll student. I comply with all her rules and I still receive nothing more than the minimum. The message at home is – don't eat too much. Don't eat the cookies. When I tell her I need yeast infection medicine – she complains. She buys me dollar store hygiene products. That makes me break out. Her daughter and grandkids get different soap, different shampoo and lotion. This problem open my eyes to the point that there are some cruel people in this world with positions to try to help when in reality are in it for the money.

CFSA and GAL support: Throughout my time in foster care, I had to learn how to rely on myself, how to communicate calmly, and how to advocate for myself. No one taught me these things. I learned them on my own. My GAL does advocate for me but is not that involved. He has never done a home visit and only checks in before court. My social worker knows everything. I keep it real. She has been helpful and does things for me that my foster parent won't do like buy me medicine when I am sick. She should have investigated my foster parent since that is a form of neglect. I have not worked with OYE very much yet. I did go on a college tour, which was nice.

They said they would give me information for financial aid and college but it's hard to get there. I live on the south side and they won't help you with anything unless you meet with them. Luckily my teachers have filled in the gaps.

My biggest frustration with CFSA and social workers is that everyone does not know about what resources are available for youth. I knew about how to get a lap top but my social worker did not. So a lot of youth don't get what they need. The youth who have the best social workers get all the benefits. CFSA needs to do a better job of informing youth about their rights and making sure social workers have access to all of the information.

There are some solutions that would address these situations:

- 1) When a social worker does a home visit, they should come in the house, check the refrigerator, check our rooms, and question the foster parents to see if I am getting I needed.
- 2) Support kids to get involved in extracurricular activities. They should be involved in sports, violin classes, community service, and clubs. Every kid has something they like to do. Take the time to find out what they want to do. Make sure that they have transportation home from the activity because foster parents will try not to pay for it. As long as we are doing something good and productive, they should support us. If more youth were involved in extracurricular, the percentage that needs medication would decrease.
- 3) Youth in care should evaluate the foster parents that are up and coming. They should have a committee of foster youth who know what foster parents are supposed to do, are good advocates, and have been in the system a while -- to evaluate the new foster parents.
- 4) Make sure the Transportation Subsidy Law is implemented quickly so that youth in foster care can get to where they need to go. Transportation should not be an issue if you are doing something productive.
- 5) Most of us have had a rough time. All youth should get a stipend so that we can be independent and prepare for the future. After age 16, we should be more in control of the money. It would help eliminate the foster parents who are just in it for the money. When the foster parents find out about this, they are going to say, "Oh no...we should be in charge of the money." If they say that, you know that they are in this for the wrong reasons.

Thank you for being concerned and allowing the youth who are effected to share their experiences.