

**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 Councilmember Graham and other council members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Noel Watkins. I am 16 years old. I am a member of the Foster Care Campaign staff at The Young Women's Project. I have been in the foster care system off and on since I was seven years old. I am in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade at Dunbar Senior High School and I want to go to cosmetology school to learn to do hair when I graduate.

I first came into the system when I was seven. Since then I have gone back to my mother, lived in multiple foster homes and multiple group homes. It has been pretty crazy. I haven't been with my mother in five years now.

**I have lived in multiple foster homes and group homes.** I been sent back to my mother and then returned to the system multiple times. Everything would go well for a little while and then go bad again. That is when I would be sent back to foster care. The final time I was sent back to foster care was after getting into a fight with my mother's boyfriend (who was a sex offender). I then went to my sister's home to live. Things started going good until I started growing up and I got to that rebellious stage. I was then sent to a foster home. The foster mom used to put her hands on me and I complained. Finally, I ran away and they sent me back to live with my sister. Things didn't work out with my sister and I was sent to a foster home. The foster mother was okay but she was almost never home. I was with my little sister. My sister and I used to fight a lot at that home. The lady used to feed us well but she would leave a lot and she never took us to the doctor. One day she left to go to NY and never returned. I was then sent back to live with my sister. We got into another argument and I ran away. I did not feel safe. I was then sent to a group home, Ionia Whipper.

At the group home I would get into fights and arguments with staff. I was unhappy there. The food was nasty. I complained to my social worker, she said it would get better but it didn't. I was not getting any allowance. It was the worse. Again I was sent to live with my sister. Things were going well until I got suspended from school. At this point I was sent back to the group home. This is where I am now. It always felt like things were repeating for me. I was always moving from one place to the next, then back and then moving again.

Placement Issues:

**My living situation is really stressful, especially the food situation.** The food is horrible. The staff member does not know how to cook. Food is undone such as the meat being pink. We do not get to give any suggestions on what they serve or what they buy from the store. I am so hungry at times and when I am hungry I get irritated.

Recently when I came back from a visit with my sister there was no food out in the house. All of the food was locked up. The only ones who have access to the food are the staff. I had to go to Safeway to get food. This has happened a few times. I do not feel like I should have to use my own money to buy food.

**In December and January we had bedbugs.** It was so bad that some of the ladies would not sleep in their beds. The house social worker tried to fix the problem by spraying the beds down but it didn't work. I told my social worker but she did not respond. I even took pictures of the bites on my body and sent them to my social worker and she said she would do something but she never did. Finally, they had the entire house sprayed down and the bugs were finally gone.

**There are also issues with the staff at my group home.** Some of the staff are just mean. One is very rough. She talks to us as if we were in the streets. She says stuff like she would hurt us. I feel like it is not necessary. In a lot of situations she is not the adult. Other staff have said they would not protect us if there was a fight. I don't like that. I have had many issues in the group home. The police were called on me. Sometimes it was my fault and other times the cops never should have been called. I just don't feel as though they treat me fairly.

**I recommend that:**

1. The group home let us have a say in what food to buy instead of the staff only buying what they want us to eat or what they want to eat. The residents can help plan the menu. We should have some choice in the food that is served.
2. The group home should do a better job in hiring staff. They should hire people who like to work with youth. Staff should have consequences if they do something that is against the rules. If we get consequences then they should too.

Reunification:

**I would like to go back home to live with my mother.** I feel like CFSA is making the relationship with my mom worse. I used to have a tight bond with my mom but now I don't because I don't see her as much. My mom needs help. I feel like if I go home I could change a lot of things. I can get a job and help out. I can help take care of my younger siblings. It would be a normal family. A start would be allowing my mother to see her kids on the weekends. It is unfair because my family has been ripped apart. My sisters used to be so close but they are not. My brothers hate my mom because they think she just gave them away but she didn't. It makes me very sad.

**I recommend** that CFSA provide more support to families to help them get themselves together so that kids can go home. They should help parents find jobs and help them get their homes setup.

Education:

**I was put in special education classes in September of 2013.** I was having problems in my classes and I needed extra help. I am not learning anything because I am on Plato, special learning website for kids in special education. It has tutorials. My teacher doesn't explain anything. He just sits behind the computer all day. Even if I ask for help and he comes over I still do not understand. I do not like the kids in the classroom. Everyday there is a fight. I have talked to my social worker about this and I have an IEP meeting coming up in March. I want to get back in general education classes. She said that she will deal with it but I am still in these crazy classes learning nothing. I do not feel like I have what I need to go to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. I feel very stressed. Stress at school and stress at my group home. I feel like I don't ever have a breather. I was given an assessment by CFSA but I am not sure what will happen next.

**I recommend** that CFSA make sure that social workers get tutors for their youth and provide more support for going to school and succeeding.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to my testimony. Have a good day.