

**Testimony to the Committee on Health & Human Services
For The Performance Oversight Hearing on the
Child & Family Services Agency**

**Shannon Mack
March 3, 2016**

Good afternoon Councilmember Alexander and other Council Members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Shannon Mack. I am 22 years old and I graduated high school in 2011. I am a member of the Foster Care Campaign staff; we are advocates for youth. We do outreach to youth and find ways to change and improve the system. I am a youth advocate because I believe that foster youth who need help should be heard whether or not adults feel that they are right. Thank you for hearing my testimony.

I aged out of the foster care system on June 20th 2014. On my 21st birthday, I packed up my own stuff and put all of my items in my social worker's car. She took me to a shelter and left me there and said bye. I did not have anything when I left the system. I didn't have a bank account or any savings. All I had was myself and my clothes. I did not get any documents. I had to get them on my own.

I'm currently staying at Casa Ruby, which is a drug-free long-term shelter for LGBTQ youth. I can stay there until I am 24 years old. Casa Ruby has very strict guidelines. While you are residing there you have to be in school or working, and you also have to have very low violations to continue to stay there. The biggest violation is staying out overnight too often. They figure if you can stay out all the time then you have alternative options for places to live.

Since living at Casa Ruby, I've experienced many problems. I have to deal with rodents eating through my snacks, and I was kicked out of the house when I wasn't feeling well after being told I could stay. Even though I have informed the staff of some of the issues I have, nothing has been resolved, and I still feel neglected. It does not feel like a home. Casa Ruby seems to have issues with funding because the staff often say that they don't have money for food. We are told that the bills in the house are so high that they have to make cutbacks.

Since aging out of care, I have had five collaborative workers from Collaborative Solutions for Communities (formerly Columbia Heights Collaborative). I had so many because they would leave and find other jobs. Many of them were not really able to help me with finding housing, employment or anything else. There was a time when I was couch surfing and out in the cold all day and my worker did not do anything to help. Thankfully, my current

Collaborative worker is doing an extremely great job at supporting me. I feel like she cares about my future and where my life will be going in the future. It feels good to know that I have somebody in my corner who wants to see me succeed.

Transportation was also a problem until I enrolled in a DOES employment program. My shelters would give tokens but the tokens were not always available and were not always enough to get me where I need to go. Not having transportation money was hard because I am homeless and still need to get around. I need to get to work, attend appointments, and see my children. There were times when we received money from CFSA through the Aftercare Program for transportation. In October I received a check for \$300 from my Collaborative worker for three months transportation assistance. This helped a lot because I was able to travel around town searching for jobs and get back and forth to my appointments. Unfortunately, last month when I asked for the assistance for the next three months I was told by my collaborative worker that CFSA was no longer providing the money.

My advice for foster youth who are about to age out is that they should take things more seriously when they are in care because once we age out of the system, there is not much support.

I have the following recommendations for CFSA improving the aftercare program:

- **Transportation:** There should be a program for former foster youth where they can receive subsidized or free transportation for the first two years out of care while they are working or in school.
- **Aftercare Programming:** The aftercare program should be staffed by people who really care and take the time to understand what youth are going through. There should be a actual center where former foster youth can go that will serve as a one-stop center and drop-in center. **This** place would have different resources -- computers that work, job counselors, a place to sign up for services, information on housing, clothing and food services, and just a room to relax and listen to music.
- **Housing:** There should be more housing programs for youth who age out of care. Even though I have not been there, but we need more places like Wayne Place.

Thank you for listening.