



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

**Tiara Miller
Foster Care Campaign Staff, Young Women's Project**

February 10, 2012

Greetings Chairman Graham and members of the City Council. My name is Tiara Miller. I am 20 years old and preparing to age out of the system next month on March 5. I have been in the foster care system for about 15 years. I work part time at Macy's as well as the Young Women's Project. I transferred from South Carolina State University to UDC, where I am a sophomore social work major. There are two issues that I would like to share with you today: 1) the lack of programs in place for youth aging out and; 2) the difficulties youth have getting their tuition bills paid on time by CFSA.

Emancipation is important to me because I have given the agency my whole life and I feel as though I am ready to move forward and close this chapter of my life. A lot of people use foster care as a crutch. Being in foster care has not enabled or crippled me in any way. If anything it has toughened my skin and prepared me for the real world. Emancipation gives me a bitter sweet feeling. I have the best support team anyone could ask for. My GAL (Gary Jacobs), social worker (Maximus Onouha and Lisa Emmi), educational advocate (Fatima Dariani), and CASA worker (Melanie Mfume) have been great and I'll miss working with them. I also was lucky to have a great judge –Lori Parker. I love her. But even with this great support team – I have a lot of unanswered questions and still feel confused about the whole process. What happens if I cannot find a job? How will I be able to support myself? Who will take me in if I need help? I have friends to fall back on, but really no family.

I have one month before I age out and I am as ready as I can be! I have two jobs and I'm in school full time. I plan on staying until the end of the semester and then moving to South Carolina. It's more convenient and less expensive. I've been applying for jobs in South Carolina also. The only thing I am waiting for now is the response from rapid housing. But I am prepared to move forward without their assistance. For the past 20 months, my foster mother has been putting aside \$200 a month into an account. This was my team's idea and the rule. If she couldn't do it, I couldn't stay there. This rule should apply to all foster youth – then people will have some savings when they age out.



My transition process and ITILP plan was really thorough. We categorized everything. They wanted to see my bank statements and my plan to pay for school. Now when we meet, we update and have resolutions. If it's legal issues, my GAL and CASA are on it. My social worker handles my living situation. They let me bust my butt make mistakes, but they are always there to put things in place when I get right back on it.

I feel lucky because I have a lot of options. A lot of youth don't. My own brother is one of those people. We got separated when I was 12 and he was 14. He stayed in the house and I got kicked out and changed agencies. He went straight from the foster home to a group home, and then from group home to group home to juvenile centers until he was 18. For two years we lost contact and he went to jail. Eventually he emancipated and went to live with our father. He should have stayed with the agency. Now he's homeless. There are two big differences in our lives. When we were separated at 12, he stayed with a CFSA team and I went to Family Matters. Second, I was placed in a foster home and he bounced around in group homes.

There are many foster youth who don't have family they can live with. The chances of a foster youth getting a good enough job to sustain themselves is slim to none. The Office of Youth Empowerment has the responsibility of getting youth ready for life on their own and school. I can honestly say I haven't been to a function that has helped me or influenced any of my decisions. I went to Keys for Life every Tuesday and Thursday for a year. They give you an agenda and say we will work on FASFA, but nothing happens. You go in, they talk for a couple minutes, you have refreshments and that's it. We ate and had fashion shows and Christmas parties, but they never talked about emancipation. They never talked about going off to college and didn't tell us the requirements of maintaining financial support. We got \$25 and that came in handy a year later when we finally got our check. I complained that it wasn't helping me and I stopped going.

I do wish there were more effective programs in place for the youth sooner than when they are already aging out. One program I am part of now is Rapid Housing, which pays up \$5,000 a year as a rent subsidy for youth who already have jobs. There are a couple of problems with this program. First, you cannot apply until three months before you turn 21. Next, it's only available to employed youth, yet the agency does not assist youth with finding jobs. You have to do it on your own, and it has to be a good enough job to supply other needs like utilities, furniture, food, etc. My support team is helping me look for apartments, budget, and make smart long



term decisions. My current goal is to find housing with a flexible lease agreement until I decide whether or not I want to move back to the south after this semester is over.

I believe there should be more options for youth as far as aging out. Statistics show 12 – 36 percent of youth experience homelessness after emancipation and 59 percent have insignificant funds to support themselves. These statistics show that there needs to be more health insurance options, living arrangements, and support for fostered youth, especially since CFSA receives \$1.3 million from the federal government to help with the transition through education, employment, counseling, housing, and other support services.

The biggest problem that I've had with CFSA is getting my college bills paid on time. I was enrolled in South Carolina State University from 2009 until the summer of 2011. My first semester was good. My bills were on time and I was able to get a 2.3 that semester. I had a lot of support. Mr. Mitchell made sure everything was paid. The second semester, Shalonda Knox took over and that's when my problems started. My tuition was not paid on time and she blamed my school. But the problem was – they needed to talk to the school administrator and Shalonda was never available to talk. No one could ever reach her. Because my tuition and bills were not paid on time, I was not able to attend my classes. I was also not allowed to take out a loan. My bill was eventually paid midterm, but by then it was extremely hard for me to catch up. I ended up failing all of my classes. During the next semester, my financial aid came through, but because my tuition was paid so late from CFSA, I was not able to register for most of the classes I needed. They were already filled. For the next three semesters, I was taking extra courses so that I could make up the ones I failed, but was never able to bring my grade point average above a 2.0. In summer 2011, Ms. Shalonda informed me that that they were not going to pay my tuition or even part of it because I was no longer eligible because three semesters had passed and I did not have a 2.0. I did my research and saw that if you do not have a 2.0 you at least have to be in good academic standing with your school. I was only on probation for one semester and should have still been eligible. They said I should have received a letter saying my ETV was denied so I could appeal it, but a letter never came.

Two semesters later I am enrolled at UDC and still awaiting my ETV acceptance letter. Until then I will have to pay for school out of loans. This impacted my education a great deal. Not only did I have to move back home and stand out a semester, but now I have a \$10,000 loan balance. If education is as important to the agency as it is to the youth, the agency should try harder to communicate with the schools on the students' behalf and



push for a more hasty process. I was told the physical checks do not go out until October of the fall semester. By then classes are dropped and close to impossible to get back into.

I needed them to pay my bill on time. A lot of people need help applying for college, filling out their FASFA, but that kind of help is really not available at CFSA and they act as if you shouldn't go to college, especially not away to college. From Family Matters there is a very strong message that you have to go to college. They beat me with a college stick, and they were the ones who ended up buying my books, paying for transportation, and making sure my housing was covered when my rooming was dropped. That is OYE's responsibility, but my agency took care of it.

ETV and Keys for Life are good ideas, but the support and communication behind it need to change. They need people more qualified and people who care more. I know some people are doing their jobs and everyone else's, but there are a lot of people not doing their part.