

**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 Latrisha Avery. I am 18 years old. I've been in the system for 10 years. I lived in eight different foster homes and went to five different elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. I am a senior at Suitland high school now and will graduate in May 2014. I am currently living with my sister and will be moving into Legal Guardianship within the next couple of months when my case will be closed. I have been a member of the Foster Care Campaign staff since May 2013. We are a group of youth ages 16-20 who work together to advocate for other youth in foster care so that the system can be better for years to come. Thank you for hearing my testimony.

I am in a good place right now and 12th grade has been awesome. I am looking forward to graduation. I am getting ready to transition into college and preparing for a business and culinary track. I am hoping to own a restaurant some day. My school is very supportive. We have a gear up program that gets us ready for college. They even have a grant to pay for the SATs and other college prep. My friends are supportive. We have the same classes and have study sessions.

But it wasn't always this way. In April 2013, I moved with my sister and I was still going to a PG county public school. The decision was made – by my social worker and eventually my judge – that I would need to transfer to the DC Hospitality High College Prep Charter School in my senior year. This would also involve going to summer school (which I did) and then taking a whole set of new classes, including night school classes, if I wanted to graduate on time. I did not want to leave Suitland High School because I had a support network. There were teachers who cared about me and friends that I had for years. I decided to try to fight the decision. I got names and numbers and tried to figure out a solution.

I went to my social worker but she was not very involved at the time and said she didn't want me to do all this extra work if I was going to end up having to transfer anyway. I went to my education advocate who could not figure out

how to help. I went to my GAL and judge who tried to help me but in the end had to support the transfer because there was tuition of \$13,000 that had to be paid for me to stay at Suitland. They said that I could adapt and be fine.

In July I started working at YWP. The staff suggested I contact CFSA Director Brenda Donald and explain my situation. I wrote to her in early August asking her to make an investment in my education and my career. I got an email back the same day that said that she would look into my story and see if there was anything she could do. On August 14th, a week later, I got an email back from her saying that my tuition would be paid for to go to Suitland high school my senior year. That was the best day of my life. If Director Donald would not have done that, it would have been very hard for me to finish high school. I probably would have dropped out of school.

College Preparation: My older sister went to college and because of that she became my role model. I knew in 5th grade, that I wanted to go to school for culinary arts. I had a plan in 7th grade to open my own restaurant. It has been in my head for a very long time. Youth need to know that someone is listening to them. I've been getting help from a lot of people. My sister helped me identify schools. My school guidance counselor helped prepare me for the SATs, and Miss Shalonda Knox at OYE. The place where I still need help is with financial aid. I am looking at what college costs and I don't think I will be able to afford it. A lot of the schools I am applying to are private culinary schools that don't qualify for government support. I might go to a community college and then transfer. I might have to take out a small loan. I need to figure out how to cover books, college supplies and kitchen tools. In culinary there are lab fees that have to be paid every quarter/semester and if you don't pay the fee then you can't do the classes and you will fail the class. OYE should have regular college prep classes that get youth educated on what they need to do if they are going to college.

My case is scheduled to be closed any month between March–April. I think they rushed it. My sister is 27. I felt like it was going to be too much on my sister and she should be getting herself stable not taking care of her little sister. I told her she shouldn't have to take on such a burden but she insisted. There is a lot of pressure to close another case. I think it is the best option. No one has explained to me how closing my case will influence my college options. I am just now starting my YTP meetings but it's late. I wish I would have started them earlier. My sister is taking care of most things – housing, health care and other necessities – so the meetings go pretty well. I have a savings account and I have been saving. I do get a monthly allowance and a clothing allowance. I get my transportation subsidy through OYE by emailing Mr. Jenkins and telling him when I need a monthly pass to pick up.

Here are my suggestions for how to improve education for older youth:

All youth should have a YTP education meeting when they turn 14 so that youth can start thinking about what they want to do. That is the age when you need to get into a good school and start to plan your future. I had my sister to help me but most youth don't have anyone to take a strong role. There should be a policy so that adults have to listen to youth about education decisions. It's their life. They need to live with it. It seems like a lot of decisions are made for adult convenience instead of for the youth. Listen to the clients. We might be young but when it comes to the important stuff, we know what would be helpful to us.

I had a successful education experience because I was placed in and stayed in a good school. Find the good schools and keep them in the schools. Don't put youth in the problem schools or the school that is easiest. Don't move children out of a school just because they change their placement. Don't assume that they will adapt. We are not adapting. I think one of the reasons so many youth drop out is because they are forced to transfer. When a child is forced into a school, they are going to rebel and drop out and that means they need to apply for the GED. I almost dropped out and I was a really good student. The \$13,000 kept me from dropping out of school, it helped me get to college, it kept me from getting into fights and getting suspended, it helped me be a better person. That \$13,000 literally changed my life. It is really a small price to pay.

Thank you for hearing my testimony.