CHILDREN WHO AGE OUT OF THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON INCOME SECURITY AND FAMILY SUPPORT

OF THE

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U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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CHILDREN WHO AGE OUT OF THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

THURSDAY, JULY 12, 2007

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INCOME SECURITY AND FAMILY SUPPORT,
Washington, DC.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:04 a.m., B–318, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Jim McDermott [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

[The advisory announcing the hearing follows:]

ADVISORY

FROM THE COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON INCOME SECURITY AND FAMILY SUPPORT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 05, 2007
ISFS–9

CONTACT: (202) 225–1721

McDermott Announces Hearing on Children Who "Age Out" of the Foster Care System

Congressman Jim McDermott (D–WA), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support of the Committee on Ways and Means, today announced that the Subcommittee will hold a hearing on children emancipating from the foster care system. **The hearing will take place on Thursday, July 12, 2007, at 10:00 a.m. in room B–318 Rayburn House Office Building.**

In view of the limited time available to hear witnesses, oral testimony at this hearing will be from invited witnesses only, including a number of former foster children. However, any individual or organization not scheduled for an oral appearance may submit a written statement for consideration by the Committee and for inclusion in the printed record of the hearing.

BACKGROUND:

Eligibility for federal foster care assistance generally ends at age 18, although some States extend this limit with their own funds. The number of children who emancipate from (or "age-out" of) the foster care system upon reaching this age has increased from 19,000 in 2001 to over 24,000 in 2005 (the most recent available data). This increase in the number of youth discharged from foster care has occurred at the same time that the overall number of children in the system has decreased, from 544,614 in FY2001 to 513,131 in FY2005.

Studies indicate that youth who have "aged out" of foster care fare poorly relative to their counterparts in the general population on outcome measures related to employment, education, homelessness, mental health, medical insurance coverage, involvement with the criminal justice system, early pregnancy, and poverty. For example, research suggests that one in seven youth suffer from homelessness after they are discharged from foster care and over half lack health coverage.

Children who are at risk of aging out of foster care, as well as those recently discharged upon reaching the age of 18, may receive services under the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, including counseling, life-skills training, educational assistance, mentoring, job placement services, and a limited amount of housing assistance. While funding for this program was increased in 1999, its impact on outcomes for former foster children is still uncertain because an assessment and data collection system for the program has yet to be established in final form by the Department of Health and Human Services.

In announcing the hearing, Chairman McDermott stated, **"When most children reach the age of 18, their parents continue to support and help them during their transition into adulthood. As the de-facto parents of foster children, we should do no less. We need to evaluate whether we are meeting that obligation, or whether we are simply showing these kids the door without sufficient support, resources and skills to succeed. "**

FOCUS OF THE HEARING:

The hearing will focus on services and outcomes for children who "age out" of the foster care system.

DETAILS FOR SUBMISSION OF WRITTEN COMMENTS:

Please Note: Any person(s) and/or organization(s) wishing to submit for the hearing record must follow the appropriate link on the hearing page of the Committee website and complete the informational forms. From the Committee homepage, *http://waysandmeans.house.gov*, select "*110th Congress*" from the menu entitled, "*Hearing Archives*" (*http://waysandmeans.house.gov/Hearings.asp?congress=18*). Select the hearing for which you would like to submit, and click on the link entitled, "*Click here to provide a submission for the record*." Once you have followed the online instructions, completing all informational forms and clicking "submit" on the final page, an email will be sent to the address which you supply confirming your interest in providing a submission for the record. You ***MUST REPLY*** to the email and ***ATTACH*** your submission as a Word or WordPerfect document, in compliance with the formatting requirements listed below, by close of business **August 2, 2007**. **Finally**, please note that due to the change in House mail policy, the U.S. Capitol Police will refuse sealed-package deliveries to all House Office Buildings. For questions, or if you encounter technical problems, please call (202) 225–1721.

FORMATTING REQUIREMENTS:

The Committee relies on electronic submissions for printing the official hearing record. As always, submissions will be included in the record according to the discretion of the Committee. The Committee will not alter the content of your submission, but we reserve the right to format it according to our guidelines. Any submission provided to the Committee by a witness, any supplementary materials submitted for the printed record, and any written comments in response to a request for written comments must conform to the guidelines listed below. Any submission or supplementary item not in compliance with these guidelines will not be printed, but will be maintained in the Committee files for review and use by the Committee.

1. All submissions and supplementary materials must be provided in Word or WordPerfect format and MUST NOT exceed a total of 10 pages, including attachments. Witnesses and submitters are advised that the Committee relies on electronic submissions for printing the official hearing record.

2. Copies of whole documents submitted as exhibit material will not be accepted for printing. Instead, exhibit material should be referenced and quoted or paraphrased. All exhibit material not meeting these specifications will be maintained in the Committee files for review and use by the Committee.

3. All submissions must include a list of all clients, persons, and/or organizations on whose behalf the witness appears. A supplemental sheet must accompany each submission listing the name, company, address, telephone and fax numbers of each witness.

Note: All Committee advisories and news releases are available on the World Wide Web at *http://waysandmeans.house.gov*.

The Committee seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202–225–1721 or 202–226–3411 TTD/TTY in advance of the event (four business days notice is requested). Questions with regard to special accommodation needs in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats) may be directed to the Committee as noted above.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. The meeting will come to order.

Today we are going to have a hearing on children who age out of foster care, and at any given time, there are over half a million children in the foster care system.

Ultimately, they will either return home or find an adoptive family, but some of these kids will stay in the system until they reach

18, at which point they are turned out into the world with little support, few skills, and sometimes nowhere to live.

It is like getting an eviction notice from the Government for doing nothing other than turning 18.

I am going to ask everyone here today to remember your life when you were 18. Had you been raised in a safe and stable family up to that point? Were you receiving any kind of support and guidance from your family? Did they help you with a place to live and a way to pay for your education?

Imagine if the answer to all those questions was a resounding no. How might that have changed the course of your own life?

As the de facto parents of foster kids, all of us have an obligation to give these young people the best possible chance to succeed.

To achieve this goal, we need to focus on three big targets. The first is ensuring stable, supportive and loving environments for children while they are in foster care. It goes without saying that a nurtured child is much more likely to mature into a productive adult.

The second priority is to connect these children to a family. In a perfect world, that means adoption. A child is never too old to benefit from an adoptive family, but it also can mean finding relatives who may have lost touch with the child but who are willing to provide guidance and support during the child's transition to adulthood.

Of course, there also are other caring adults—mentors, case workers, teachers—who could make a huge difference in the life of a young person learning to find their way in the world.

Finally, we need a support system for young people after they turn 18. While we all thought we were invincible when we were 18, we learned over time just how vulnerable we and every other 18 year old really is. Let's not forget that when we move ahead.

The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program was partly designed to fulfill such a need, although it also focuses on young children who are at risk of aging out of foster care.

The program provides counseling, life skills training, educational assistance, mentoring, job placement services, and a limited amount of housing assistance.

Funding for this program was increased and made more flexible in 1999 but its impact on outcomes for former children is still somewhat uncertain in my view.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is at least partly to blame for our limited understanding in this area because the agency has yet to implement an assessment and data collection system for the Chafee program, nearly 8 years after being mandated by Congress to do so.

As we consider this last issue of providing adequate support for foster youth when they turn 18, we ultimately have to ask the question of whether there is an appropriate age for Federal foster care to end. It is certainly not when most parents end support for their kids. You never get rid of them, I can tell you, even when they are 40 years old.

In fact, one study found the average American youth receives about $38,000 from their parents after they reach the age of 18 for tuition and financial assistance.

We also need to consider that research is beginning to show that youth who stay in care longer have better outcomes than those who exit from foster care at age 18. Some States have actually taken it upon themselves to extend foster care beyond 18.

Roughly 24,000 young people are pushed out of the foster care system every year when they reach their 18th birthday, and I hope today's hearing begins a longer conversation about how we can better support these kids in foster care. They really are our children.

Before yielding to the Subcommittee Ranking Member, Mr. Weller, I want to yield the remaining portion of my time to Mr. Stark for a few comments. Mr. Stark?

Mr. STARK. Why do I not withhold, Mr. Chairman, until we have heard from our colleague, Mr. Cardoza, and Mr. Weller, and then I will chime in later. Thanks.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. I will turn the mike over to Mr. Weller, the Ranking Member.

Mr. WELLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good morning.

Today's hearing explores the challenges faced by children who age out of the foster care system at age 18 and the effectiveness of assistance available to help them.

In 2005, over 24,000 youth aged out of the nation's foster care system. Among many serious challenges, these young people have lower high school graduation rates, higher rates of homelessness, and a higher rate of being incarcerated than other youth their age.

The simple fact is that too many youth who age out of foster care stumble and fall on their way to adulthood. Some never recover. Others, including the young people we will hear from today, find their way through extraordinary personal effort, involvement of dedicated relatives, as well as other adults, a little luck, or all of the above.

The odds against their success is not what any of us would want for our own children. It is equally unacceptable for kids in foster care whose care is our responsibility.

Under current law, key support to help these young people make the transition to adulthood comes from the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, which funds what are called "independent living services."

Today, the Federal Government provides States $140 million per year, which is twice what was provided a decade ago. Another $44 million per year has more recently been added just for education and training vouchers for college and other postsecondary training expenses.

We know funding has been going up to help youth aging out of foster care. What we do not know is whether this increased spending has had a positive effect.

As the Government's Accountability Office testimony says, little information is available to assess program outcomes. That is unacceptable.

I urge the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to finalize whatever regulations or instructions are needed to help States report and analyze data about youth who access those services so that we know what is working and what is not.

Despite these gaps in our knowledge, I am encouraged to learn of several promising demonstrations, especially involving the edu-

cation of youth in foster care. School stability and high school completion are strongly associated with better outcomes for young people making the transition to adulthood. We should do whatever it takes to ensure more foster youth complete at least high school.

We are fortunate to have a panel of young people today who have aged out of foster care. One of them, Jamaal Nutall of Joliet, lives in the congressional district I represent, and is spending the Summer working in my office here in Washington as an intern.

Jamaal and his peers will discuss their own experiences making the transition to adulthood, how current programs have helped and how they might do more.

We will also hear from an array of other experts on these issues starting with my friend and colleague, Representative Cardoza of California.

I look forward to all our witnesses' testimony.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this hearing.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Mr. Stark?

Mr. STARK. Let me add before our friend, Mr. Cardoza, enlightens us, that there is a cost to ignoring these young people. I hate to put this in dollar terms. If we think about crime, for instance, as a young person's game, Dr. McDermott and I are probably not agile enough to be second story people any more. We could probably hardly walk up the stairs much less climb through the window.

For those of you who worry about being mugged, you are not going to be mugged by people our age. This is a young person's game, and we know that if a person is convicted of a felony before they are 20, the odds are that between 20 and 50, they will spend half of that time in some kind of system.

In California, that costs $60,000 a year, if you want to put it in dollars.

Whatever we can invest to prevent that transition into the justice system, to keep them in the standards of society, I think it is worthwhile.

I wanted to just add to Mr. Cardoza's suggestion one problem that we have. About 30,000 foster children are eligible for Social Security benefits either supplemental Security income or survivor's benefits.

Many States are sending private contractors out to mine the field of foster children and get their Social Security payments, and the States are taking that money and putting it into their general fund.

For other children, that money is usually protected by a guardian appointed by the State or whomever is in charge of that child. If the money is because the child has a disability, that money should be used for extra medical care and treatment.

If the child has that extra Social Security payment because a parent or parents have died, that money should be set aside for the child. That child has a worse or extra problem coming out of foster care, and that money could be set aside as it is for other children to be used when they mature. It could be used for college, for education, for transportation, buy a car to get to work.

It is a small amount and really does not belong to the States. It belongs to those children.

My amendment would suggest that the States be required to find out where children are entitled and become the trustee for that child and see that the money is either used for the child's particular needs or is there and saved for the time when they mature out of the system.

I hope to talk with my colleagues about that legislation later. I want to thank Dennis for being here today.

Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Thank you. Mr. Cardoza, welcome to the Committee. We are glad to have you here because you not only are a distinguished Member but somebody who has actually done the heavy lifting of having foster kids. We welcome your testimony.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE DENNIS CARDOZA, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

Mr. CARDOZA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Your whole testimony will go into the record, so if you want to try to stay within 5 minutes, we would appreciate it.

Mr. CARDOZA. I will do my very best. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to just start today by thanking you very much for this hearing on behalf of all these young people and the people that have crowded this room today. This is a very important issue.

I could not agree more with Mr. Weller and Mr. Stark that this is a compelling issue that needs attention. Your leadership, Mr. Chairman, on this has been fantastic and I appreciate your allowing me to testify today.

As you say, I have a written statement that will also be submitted to the record.

I have discussed this with many of you. I have a very personal interest in this issue. Seven years ago, my wife and I adopted foster children. They are not foster children any more. They are our children.

Since then, I have advocated on behalf of adoption and foster children with the California legislature and here in Congress.

Too many children in foster care sit waiting for permanent families. There are 118,000 children in foster care waiting to be adopted and numerous barriers keep them in limbo. Children often bounce from one system to another, from child welfare to juvenile justice, as Mr. Stark said, to mental health as their needs intensify.

Moreover, each year 20,000 children age out of foster care without being adopted or reunified with parents. Often these youth have no permanent connection to a caring adult.

When children turn 18, society considers them adults. For children lucky enough to have loving and caring parents, they have the luxury, as you said, Mr. Chairman, to turn to their parents in times of financial or emotional distress or in need of aid.

Unfortunately, foster children who have aged out of the system do not have anyone to turn to. These children often have no one they can rely on as they make the difficult transition to adulthood.

Foster care studies have shown that in the 4 years after leaving foster care, nationwide, 25 percent of aged out youth have been

homeless at least a partial period of that time. Forty-2 percent have become parents themselves. Fewer than 20 percent are able to support themselves, and only 46 percent have graduated from high school.

Since they lack the support systems most young adults take for granted, aged out foster care teens are at risk for substance abuse, domestic violence, poverty, and falling into the trap that Mr. Stark so well illuminated at the beginning of his State.

In the face of these daunting statistics and challenges, the problems can seem overwhelming. However, there are concrete steps that we can take to improve the lives of these at risk youth.

One of the bills that I have introduced this session is H.R. 1376, a bill which would extend Medicaid coverage for foster children who have aged out of the system, by encouraging State health care coverage through age 21.

The Medicaid Foster Care Coverage Act of 2007 would provide health care coverage for emancipated foster children, many of whom face these daunting physical and emotional problems as they transition to adult life.

I am particularly concerned about youth on mood stabilizing medications. Given the fact that a number of these young people are on these medications to cope with their challenges, and frankly, the post-traumatic stress of being in the system, the very day they turn 18 and society asks them to assume the obligations of adulthood, the rug is pulled out from under them by having their access to these vital medications taken away.

This is simply unfair and frankly counterproductive, and as Mr. Stark said, it is not a good cost/benefit analysis if we take a close look at it.

We need to rectify this situation and that is exactly what my bill will do.

In addition, I am currently working on legislation to ensure that every child has a court appointed special advocate, Children and Adolescent Services Advocate (CASA). CASAs are trained community volunteers to speak for the best interest of abused and neglected children in court. All too often, the needs of children can get lost in judicial proceedings. CASA volunteers are there to ensure that the best interest of the child are safeguarded in these court proceedings.

I would just like to mention to the Committee that my children were brought to us by an observing CASA volunteer, who was my children's kindergarten teacher. They saw that my kids were under distress and were being abused a second time in the foster care system. She was able to remedy that because of her training and her vigilance.

Moreover, other Members have introduced thoughtful pieces of legislation that address other aspects of the problems facing these disconnected youth: homelessness, helping runaways, lack of educational opportunities, and a myriad of challenges encountered by foster youth.

However, the problem will not be solved by legislation alone. There needs to be a broader societal shift and understanding that we can simply not neglect these children any longer. Until we start

to think of these children as Mr. Stark said, as our children, progress will be stymied.

Unless we embrace these children as our own and start to think of their problems as our problems, we will be tackling this problem with one arm tied behind our back.

I think we first and foremost must do everything possible to encourage adoption. There is simply no substitute for ensuring that these children are placed in stable and loving homes and we should support policies that enhance our ability to find qualified people to become adoptive parents and moreover, we should find ways to financially help these parents who are willing to assume this responsibility.

I am going to leave the rest of my testimony for the record. I thank you for the opportunity. I stand ready to answer any of your questions about the trials and tribulations and the joy of adopting children.

[The prepared statement of the Hon. Dennis Cardoza follows:]

Prepared Statement of The Honorable Dennis Cardoza, a Representative in Congress from the State of California

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify at this important hearing on the problems facing foster kids as they age out of the system. I have a written statement that I have also submitted for the record.

I have a very personal interest in this issue. Seven years ago, my wife and I adopted two foster children. Since then, I have advocated on behalf of adoption and foster children in the California Assembly and in Congress.

Too many children in foster care sit waiting for permanent families. There are about 118,000 children in foster care waiting to be adopted and numerous barriers keep them in limbo. Children often bounce from one system to another—from child welfare, to juvenile justice, to mental health—as their needs intensify.

Moreover, each year about 20,000 children age out of foster care, without being adopted or reunified with their parents. Often these youths have no permanent connection to a caring adult.

When children turn 18, society considers them adults. For children lucky enough to have loving and caring parents, they have the luxury of turning to their parents for financial and emotional support during this time. Unfortunately, foster children who have aged out of the system do not have this luxury. These children often have no one they can rely on as they make this difficult transition to adulthood.

Foster care studies have shown that in just four years after leaving foster care, nationwide 25 percent of aged-out youth have been homeless, 42 percent have become parents themselves, fewer than 20 percent are able to support themselves, and only 46 percent have graduated from high school. Because they lack the support systems most young adults take for granted, aged-out foster care teens are at high risk for substance abuse, domestic violence and poverty.

In the face of these daunting statistics and challenges, the problem can seem overwhelming. However, there are concrete steps we can take to help improve the lives of these at-risk youth.

One of the first bills I introduced this session of Congress is H.R. 1376, a bill which would extend Medicaid coverage for foster children who have aged out of the system by encouraging state health coverage through the age of 21. The "Medicaid Foster Care Coverage Act of 2007" would provide health coverage for emancipated foster children—many of whom face daunting physical and emotional problems—as they transition to adult life.

I am particularly concerned about the youth on mood stabilizing medications. Given the fact that a number of these young people are on these medications to cope with their challenges, the very day they turn 18 and society asks them to assume the obligations of adulthood the rug is pulled out from under them by having their access to these vital medications taken away. This is simply unfair and counterproductive. We need to rectify this situation and my bill will do that.

Current law provides pathways that enable states to access federal funding to extend Medicaid coverage for youth who have aged out of foster care. Currently only 18 states—including my home state of California—take advantage of this. My bill

would mandate that every state offer coverage under Medicaid for foster children through the age of 21.

Let's give these children every opportunity to succeed. No child should be denied health care due to circumstances beyond their control; it is unfair and immoral. As you continue to debate the reauthorization of SCHIP, I urge you to carefully consider how my bill compliments these efforts and may be a salutary addition to a more comprehensive approach to children's health care.

In addition, I was proud to introduce and pass a resolution, H. Res. 263, recognizing May as National Foster Care month. By highlighting this fact and bringing more national awareness to this issue, it will hopefully make Congressional action to address these needs easier and self-evident

Finally, I am currently working on legislation to ensure that every child has a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). CASA are trained community volunteers to speak for the best interests of abused and neglected children in court. All too often the needs of children can get lost in judicial proceedings and CASA volunteers are there to ensure that the best interests of the child are safeguarded in court proceedings.

CASA has significantly grown and matured from its early roots in 1977. In the course of the last thirty years, CASA has grown to a network of more than 50,000 volunteers that serve 225,000 abused and neglected children through 900+ local program offices nationwide.

However, despite these impressive numbers, more needs to be done. We must do everything possible to ensure that EVERY child has a CASA volunteer. My bill, which I hope to introduce soon, will give incentives to states to guarantee that all children receive the special attention and care that only CASA volunteers can provide.

Moreover, other Members have introduced thoughtful pieces of legislation that address other aspects of the problems facing these disconnected youth: homelessness, helping runaways, lack of educational opportunities, and the other myriad challenges encountered by foster youth.

However, the problem will not be solved by legislation alone. There has to be a broader societal shift and understanding that we simply cannot neglect these children any longer. Until we start to think of these children as OUR children, progress will be stymied. Unless we embrace these children as our own and start to think of their problems as OUR problems, we will be tackling this problem with one arm tied behind our back.

There are things we can do as policymakers and in our everyday lives to make the lives of these children just a little bit better.

First and foremost, we must do everything possible to encourage adoption. There is simply no substitute for ensuring that these children are placed in stable and loving homes. We should support policies that enhance our ability to find qualified people to become adoptive parents and, moreover, we should find ways to financially help these parents who are willing to assume this responsibility.

For the children we cannot place in permanent homes, we should do more to encourage people to be mentors. Mentoring relationships begun while foster care kids are in their mid-teens can be beneficial as the kids become more independent.

There are many innovative programs that we can learn from. For instance, the City of Los Angeles in my home state of California has done some exciting work in this area and we can draw on their experience as we think about ways to encourage more people to be mentors.

The challenge of helping foster youth is vast and daunting. However, if we can provide these children with the health care they desperately need; if we do everything in our power to place them in stable and loving homes or, in the alternative, help them find a mentor who they can look up to and learn from, we can make the lives of these children just a little bit better.

There is no time to wait; these children need our help now. We must act now if we want to help ensure these kids a bright future and reverse some of these alarming and burgeoning social ills.

I applaud this Committee for holding this series of hearings on the unique challenges facing our foster youth. As these hearings illuminate the plight of these kids, I sincerely hope we can build a consensus on a set of common-sense policies to help these children. Every child, no matter what station they may be born to, deserves a chance to be raised in a stable and loving home. Thanks again for holding this hearing and I look forward to working with the Committee on this issue.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. You skipped over part of your history in that it is not all roses.

Mr. CARDOZA. It is not.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. To the extent you would be willing to talk about that, I think it would be useful for Members to hear what happens to somebody when they adopt kids. It is really about stories that make it so people understand what the issues are.

Mr. CARDOZA. I would be very happy to tell our story. In fact, I have asked my children if it is okay with them to share their story. They understand that by telling their story, it may help other children, and they have asked me to do that.

In fact, I shared with you earlier this year that they asked me to sponsor National Foster Care Month, and you graciously allowed me to take that bill to the floor, and thank you for that.

The story of my children is this. They were living in a community in California. The children are of migrant farmworkers. The mother had mental health issues and correctional issues. She probably had suffered from some emotional issues that caused her to have these issues as I looked at the medical records that we got from the kids.

They were placed in the care of a grandparent who had 12 children living in a one bedroom house. The grandmother was 80 years old. She could not take care of them, put them in foster care. They were removed from that home.

They were in a second foster care family where they were being abused in the system. This kindergarten teacher who was a CASA volunteer recognized their stress and was able to get them to us. My wife and I had decided that we had one biologic child and we wanted to adopt some children. We had gone through the process of becoming adoptive parents.

As we moved forward, we had a very difficult time. We are not people without understanding and means. We had the financial ability to go about the adoption process. My wife is a doctor, so she had the medical background and the knowledge necessary. Myself being a legislator, I knew how to work the bureaucratic process.

Still with all that, there were significant hurdles to making the adoption happen. We had to fight hard. It took over a year to make it work. We finally got the custody and went through all the challenges.

All those processes need to be examined and streamlined. Just getting the new birth certificates and the Social Security cards were significant challenges.

To access the parental rights and all that were significant hurdles. If we were able to streamline that and give more guarantees to adoptive parents, I have a lot of my friends in the community who have asked me about adoption, and their biggest fear is going through this process, bonding with children, and then somehow having those children removed.

If we can figure out a way to streamline these processes, that would be a tremendous advantage.

As we move forward, I will tell you that there are challenges. Adoptive kids come with some baggage. All children have baggage. Parenting is the toughest thing that any of us will ever do, much tougher than being in Congress.

The reality is, and I know from personal experience, my wife and I talked about this just the other day, there are challenges with our children, but without their having gotten a permanent and stable home, there would be no chance for them with the issues they have.

That is the one compelling message that I would like to leave with this Committee today, that we have to provide the support and we absolutely have to do everything we can to get them into permanent and stable families that can then help them for the rest of their lives.

I will tell you one last thing, that is there has been no greater joy in my life than bringing these children into our lives. With all the challenges and all the hurdles that we have, from the minute I set eyes on them through the one way mirror in the Social Services Department in a county in California, they were our kids.

Anyone who wonders whether or not they will bond with young people they bring into their home, they absolutely will.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Thank you. Mr. Weller?

Mr. WELLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Mr. Cardoza, thank you for your testimony but also thank you for your leadership on these issues.

Recently, we had Michele Bachmann of Minnesota who has also been active on these issues before this Subcommittee. I know the two of you have worked together in a bipartisan way. For that, I salute you.

You mention in your testimony, and I am going to ask you a couple of pretty practical questions here, you mentioned the legislation you propose, H.R. 1376, the Medicaid Foster Care Coverage Act of 2007, which would require States to provide Medicaid coverage for children that age out of foster care until they reach the age of 21.

Many States currently have the authority if they choose to provide this type of coverage. Does California currently provide this coverage?

Mr. CARDOZA. Yes, I believe they do.

Mr. WELLER. Do you know how many States currently provide the coverage?

Mr. CARDOZA. Seventeen out of 33.

Mr. WELLER. Unfortunately, I have not checked whether or not my home State of Illinois does, but maybe you know.

Mr. CARDOZA. I do not.

Mr. WELLER. From a practical standpoint, have you scored this legislation?

Mr. CARDOZA. We have not. I would ask that the Committee assist us in receiving a score so we know exactly how much it would cost. I do not think it is that expensive, to be honest with you.

While our rules do not allow it to be considered this way, the cost/benefit analysis of making sure these kids have every opportunity to stay out of the system, as Mr. Stark indicated, while our scoring mechanism does not allow us to look at that, I think it certainly is important for us to think about the bottom line cost to Government.

Mr. WELLER. Since we have these PAY–GO rules that our Committee has to operate under, have you proposed your——

Mr. CARDOZA. I have not. I will tell you this is one that is God sent, and we need to do everything we can to try and figure out how to pay for this. I was an advocate of PAY–GO, as I am sure you probably were as well. We need to find this offset.

The reality is this is going to be budget dust in the greater scheme of things, but it is important to follow our rules and to honor PAY–GO.

Mr. WELLER. I look forward to seeing your proposed God sent. Again, thank you for your leadership on these issues. What I really appreciate is that you work in a bipartisan way on so many issues. I want to thank you for coming this morning.

Mr. CARDOZA. Thank you.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Mr. Stark?

Mr. STARK. Dennis, thank you. Thank you for sharing your experiences and those of your children with us.

I think it is through efforts like yours that we can be encouraged to find, as you say, the budget dust, necessary for us to fulfill the PAY–GO requirements.

I might just say that all of this type of legislation has perhaps the broadest bipartisan participation, if I can be allowed a little bit of political trivia.

It is interesting to note that Tom Delay's very last legislative act was the Delay/Stark bill which allowed foster children more convenience in traveling across State lines. It is probably a very little known fact that Tom and his wife were foster parents and designed in Texas an idea of foster parents living in cul-de-sacs so they could share babysitting.

Tom Delay was one of the outstanding geometry tutors for foster children in his galaxy. As I say, this has a history of working together to achieve a wonderful result. I hope this Committee can continue that. I certainly will work with my colleagues to find whatever is necessary to fund the programs that we think will help improve the lives of these children.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Dennis, for your work.

Mr. CARDOZA. Thank you.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Mr. Herger?

Mr. HERGER. I really do not have anything to add, but I do want to add in thanking you, Mr. Cardoza, for your work in this area. This is incredibly important to our country. There is no greater asset that we have as a nation than our young people.

To see the tragedy that is taking place every day in the lives of so many tens of thousands of these young people who through no fault of their own are left out there. It is tough enough for the children that we raise that have two parents every day, as you mentioned.

As a father of nine, what you are saying is so true. There is no tougher challenge we have than raising children, nor as you said, is there any greater joy that continues to grow than having children.

Thank you for what you are doing. This is a bipartisan effort. It is something that behooves each and every one of us when we are setting the priorities in these tough budgetary times to find the means and make sure we can work this out.

Again, thank you for your leadership. I commend you and I commend all those on this Committee who have also been very involved in this area. Thank you.

Mr. CARDOZA. Thank you, Mr. Herger. If I could just say in response that we have talked several times about this when you were Chair of the Committee and all. I appreciate working with you.

I wanted to make one point that I forgot in my previous testimony. Mr. McDermott, with your prior background, you probably are much more experienced to talk about this than me.

I am well aware even based on my own kids' experience in foster care of the post-traumatic stress they go through and the problems of abandonment issues they will carry through the rest of their lives.

I am told by psychological professionals that the post-traumatic stress is greater often times than troops in the field of combat. If you think about it in those kinds of terms, it speaks to how important it is.

We have to help these young people through this process, much the same way that we are responsible for helping our own soldiers get through their experience.

Mr. HERGER. That point is so well made. I have a daughter and son-in-law who have adopted, too. These are the most beautiful children, as are yours, that you could ever see. They adopted them at a young age, relatively young age. Yet, the challenges that these children have had and the counseling. Fortunately, they are in a position to afford to have the counseling that they have had to help grow these children. It is really a major undertaking.

As you have mentioned, any child that goes through this traumatic time of being without parents or being in these troubled homes where their parents really did not possess the ability to be able to give them the attention is traumatic on them and is something that is engraved in their minds and their pscyhes for really the rest of their lives.

It really takes working through this for them to be able to become the active, productive young people that they can be.

Again, thank you. Very important.

Mr. CARDOZA. Thank you.

Mr. HERGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Mr. Lewis?

Mr. LEWIS OF GEORGIA. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman, I do not have any questions, but I want to thank our friend and our colleague, Mr. Cardoza, for being here today, for his leadership, for his commitment and dedication, and for telling his story. I admire you, my friend, for doing something I call from time to time getting in the way. Continue to get in the way. Thank you.

Mr. CARDOZA. Thank you. You told my son that one day on the Floor of the House, on the day of the Voting Rights Act bill. I do not know if you recall that.

Mr. LEWIS OF GEORGIA. I do recall.

Mr. CARDOZA. He thinks very highly of you, Mr. Lewis, and so do I. Thank you for your State.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Mr. Camp?

Mr. CAMP. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Cardoza, for your testimony and for what you and Kathy are doing. It is tremendous. I do think, as we talk about foster care, adoption is such a critical part of the solution. Thank you for doing that and having been involved in these issues for a number of years. I am very impressed with what you have done.

I do think there is an area that we need to look at, and that is when children are languishing in foster care, it is something that we have all tried to deal with. Obviously, this hearing today and your bill is an attempt to make that a little bit easier.

I also think we have to look at the issue of when children have relatives in another State that are willing to take the kids but often are overlooked because of the laws. That is something that I think we need to address so that we can keep family members together, when there are suitable and willing family members available. I hope that is something that we can look at.

Again, thank you for being here. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Mr. Meek?

Mr. MEEK. Thank you, Dennis.

Mr. CARDOZA. Thank you.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. I just want to say in response to what you said about the post-traumatic issues for youngsters, I was the consultant at the Juvenile Detention Clearinghouse for the State of Washington for about 7 years.

One of the standard questions you ask young kids is tell me your three wishes. I never met a kid whose first wish was not I want to go back to my mother. No matter what the chart would show me about the place they came from and what they had been through, that still was there and it never went away. I think you are absolutely correct, that is why you deal with the issues as long as you do.

It is a pleasure to have you here and thank you very much. We will do what we can to improve the situation.

Mr. CARDOZA. Thank you.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. For our next panel, we are very fortunate to have four young people. Come on up.

[Applause.]

These are young people who have navigated their way through the foster care system. Three of them are represented by Members of this Committee, so I would like to recognize Mr. Weller, Mr. Lewis, and Mr. Meek in a moment to acknowledge them.

I also want to thank the National Foster Care Coalition for helping three of them make the trip to Washington, with special thanks to the ninth grade social studies class at North Eugene High School in Eugene, Oregon, which made a donation toward their travel.

We will start with Tyler Bacon of Florida. Mr. Meek?

Mr. MEEK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Being the only Member from Florida, I get the opportunity to introduce Mr. Bacon.

Tyler is at the age of 22. He lives in Jacksonville, Florida. He was abandoned by his mother. Tyler entered the Florida foster care system at the age of 13. He struggled through a series of group home placements and never formed a supportive attachment needed for his success in life after foster care.

Homeless at 18, jobless and faced with many medical bills, Tyler is successfully overcoming these early difficulties. Tyler just secured an apartment a few weeks ago after approximately 1 year of being homeless. Today, he sits on local State and national boards working to improve the foster care system.

His dream is to become a national public speaker for the improvement of foster care and 1 day starting a mentor program for kids and youth in care.

Tyler was selected to serve as a Foster Club All American in 2005 and is a board member of the National Independent Living Association. He is a member of the National Foster Youth Advisory Board.

He was recently promoted to manager at Blockbuster. Hook me up.

[Laughter.]

He enjoys running, playing basketball, and participating in flag football tournaments.

Mr. Chairman, as it relates to Tyler, we just met when we walked in the room. We tried to get together earlier today. I am glad, as I said in the past, that he is here along with the other young people that are here to share their personal stories, to be able to help us legislate and stand up for children and young people that are going through the system now.

Thank you for being here before the Committee.

STATEMENT OF TYLER BACON, FLORIDA

Mr. BACON. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Weller, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to come speak to you and share my experience of the foster care system, my knowledge and expertise on foster care.

My name is Tyler Bacon and I am 22 years old. I entered the foster care system at the age of 13. I remember the day I entered as if it were yesterday. I was in a court because we were going through some family therapy. I remember the judge asking my mother what she wanted to do with me. My mother responded this is not my child, I do not want anything to do with him and I do not care what happens.

He paused, looked over at my father and asked my father what he wanted to do. I turned and looked at my father as he said nothing, no response, not standing up for his own son and not knowing what to say or how to respond.

That day, I was placed in the foster care system.

While in the foster care system, I grew up in several group homes, attended several high schools and educational programs to try to succeed. While in the group homes, I was with 20 to 60 other young men at one home with staff, five per home. Under staffed and not able to ask questions or get the proper assistance that I needed to be able to learn how to be a successful adult, I struggled through the group homes.

I did not know what to ask. I did not know how to ask, how to become a man, how to become an adult, what I needed to know when I turned 18. I thought when I turned 18 that I was going to be prepared. I thought I was going to be ready. I was looking for-

ward to my 18th birthday, because I was finally going to be on my own and I was finally going to be a man.

My 18th birthday was the scariest day of my life. On my 18th birthday, I thought I was going to have a good birthday. I woke up to see my bags packed and told I was too old to be in the foster care system. I was an adult in the State's eyes, that I had to go.

I had nowhere to turn. No family. No friends. Nothing. While in the foster care system, I was not able to connect with a family. I was told I was unadoptable. No family wanted me because I was too old and I had too many family issues.

On my 18th birthday, instead of a cake, I was walking to a homeless shelter so I had somewhere to live. I struggled but I was determined to be successful and get back on my feet.

While I was homeless, I was still in high school, afraid to tell someone I was homeless because I was afraid they would kick me out of school and I would not finish my education. I was determined to succeed and graduate.

I finally graduated in 2004 in the top 5 percent of my high school. Determined. I was finally able to get back on my feet and achieve my own apartment and have a house to call my own. I still struggled, still had obstacles that I had to face.

I did not know how to do anything. I did not know how to pay bills, how to budget, basic stuff that normal every day people take advantage of. I did not know how to be a man and how to be a successful independent civilian in society.

Again, because of financial issues, I needed someone to turn to. This caused me to want to turn back to my bio family, the family who gave me up. I thought everybody is talking about if you ever need help, you can turn back to your family. I tried to reconnect with my family but nothing changed.

They still did not want me. In an altercation and a confrontation with my family, I was stabbed, ended up in the hospital having immediate surgery. Given that situation, I was unable to work. I was unable to pay for my bills, and I ended up once again homeless, evicted from my apartment because I was not able to pay my bills and I had no one to help me.

I had no family to turn to. I had no one to go home to. I had no one to help me get back on my feet. Again, I was homeless.

I struggled for a year, bouncing from friend to friend, whoever would let me stay, ending up in a hotel. I had nowhere else to go. I had to pay for my own hotel so I had a roof over my head while I was working at minimum wage at a part time job. The hotel cost me $1,200 a month, unable to save up some money to find my own apartment or fix the eviction notice that I had, to be able to pay off that.

I had nowhere else to go. Fortunately, I had family and friends within the foster care system. My brothers and sisters that I looked to that are foster youth, I looked to them as brothers and sisters.

They financially helped me and gave the opportunity to get back on my feet. They gave me financial support a family would give me and helped me get my own apartment. Again, I am thankful for them.

There are a lot of issues. No foster youth should have to go through the struggles that I went through in life. No one should have to go through these struggles.

People in a family setting take advantage because they are able to go back to their family in times of economic need. If something were to come up, people who grew up in a family setting would be able to go back to them and live in that home.

Foster youth do not have that family to turn back to. Instead, we fall back on homeless shelters, jail systems, or potentially if you are able to financially afford it, hotels.

I ask and I push for Congress to take action now. I ask for simple things. I ask that we look into extending foster care up to the age of 21.

I ask that because when you are 18, you are still struggling to learn how to be an adult, how to financially support yourself and take care of yourself. Most people who are 18 are still struggling through high school, not yet graduated, and we look at our success, the foster youth success of graduating and it is very, very low.

This is because we are forced out at the age of 18 and struggling to maintain our own lives. Education is not our first priority. Our life and our shelter is our first priority.

I can say that from experience. I have yet to attend college because my main priority was to get on my feet and find shelter for myself.

I also ask that we help provide health insurance up to the age of 21. Most youth who live in a family setting still receive health insurance through their parents' medical insurance up to the age of 21. I ask just because we are foster youth, why should we not receive the same?

I also ask that we push for permanency for all youth in the foster care system. I ask that we try our best to set foster youth up with family. Family is a very, very important thing. I ask if we cannot find a family for them, we find a successful mentor to help them through the obstacles that everybody faces in life.

Permanency is having someone to talk to and you do not need an appointment to talk to them.

I ask Congress, when you look into the issues that foster youth face and look at what we need to change, I ask you to look at yourselves and ask what would you do if we were your child? If we were your child, would you help us and provide us with medical insurance, financial stability, and opportunities for us to be able to succeed in life?

We do not ask for much. We just ask to be treated like every other kid.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Bacon follows:]

Prepared Statement of Tyler Bacon, Florida

Chairman McDermott, Ranking Member Weller, and members of this Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to appear before you today on behalf of the thousands of children and youth in foster care who can not be here in Washington to share their stories and to ask you to take action to help them.

My name is Tyler Bacon and I am 22 years old. I entered Florida's foster care system at the age of 13. I was placed in care after my mother told a judge I was not her child and she wanted nothing to do with me. Abandoned to the foster care system, I grew up in group homes with between 20 and 60 young men. I was never

given the opportunity to enter a Foster Home or build a relationship with a mom or dad. I never had anyone to talk to or go to for my problems, no one who cared when I had an issue.

At the age of eighteen I was told I was an adult and I aged out of the system. I ended up homeless on my 18th birthday. I had a bigger plan for myself, however, and I was finally able to get on my feet and get my own place.

With no other people to call family, at age twenty one I tried to reconnect with my bio family, but nothing had changed. They still did not want me in their lives. The strain of the relationship led to an argument with a family member in which I was stabbed. I ended up in the hospital with no health insurance, adding to my financial strain. After being hospitalized I was unable to return to my warehouse job as I could not do the heavy lifting required by the position. Because I could not work and had no family support, I found myself evicted and I ended up homeless once again. I stayed with friends as long as possible because trying to get my own apartment proved too difficult. Even though I had access to housing funds from the state to help pay for an apartment, landlords didn't want to rent to a young adult with an eviction on his record and I could find no one to co-sign or help with the application process.

Because I had nowhere else to stay, I ended up in a hotel for four months. While this arrangement kept me from staying on the street, it was impossible to save money due to the expensive rate of $1,200 a month, and an impossible arrangement to maintain with my minimum wage job.

The good news is that after a year of homelessness, I was finally able to save enough money to rent my own 1 bedroom apartment. I moved in last month. I am now employed full-time as a manager with Blockbuster Video and am excited that I once again am able to spend some of my time advocating for improvements of the foster care system.

I take this opportunity to ask you to consider these goals for the foster care system to improve the odds for the thousands of young people who will celebrate, or fear, their 18th birthday this year:

1. Extend foster care until age 21

Foster youth deserve the same resources, tools and support that parents provide for their own child. The state serves as our parents. We are looking to policy makers to provide the safety net a family provides. By terminating assistance at age 18, the state abandons youth at a time when they are still in great need of supervision and support. My story is a single story which approximates the struggle facing over 20,000 of my peers this year alone.

2. Provide health coverage until age 21

I urge Congress to extend health insurance to all youth from foster care to age 21. Medical expenses to young person struggling to establish independence can be crushing. In my case, medical bills have proven to be a grave obstacle to establishing myself.

3. Make permanency a priority for all youth

Most importantly, I urge Congress to provide states with the incentives and flexibility in financing to assure that everything is done to provide permanence for young people before they leave foster care. We need more funding to help former youth get into a family setting. We must provide older youth with the lifelong support a family grants their own child. Foster youth are place in the system for their best interest. How is their best interest looked after if we are sending them unprepared into the world, vulnerable, and with no safety net?

I believe the hardships I faced through my emancipation from foster care were avoidable. If I had experienced some form of permanency in my life before I left care, I know my transition would have been easier. Permanency is having someone there to help you when you need it, someone you don't need an appointment to talk to. Permanency is having someone to lean on for support when obstacles come your way. Without some permanency, many foster youth face desperate options like homelessness, shelters, jail, or if they are fortunate to be employed like me, temporary and unstable refuge in hotels.

I am determined to succeed despite the obstacles that have been placed in my path. But I implore members of Congress to act now, to make changes to improve the odds for my 513,000 younger brothers and sisters coming up through the system.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story and thoughts with you.

Respectfully,

Tyler Bacon

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Thank you very much. Mr. Lewis, would you like to introduce Mr. Reeves?

Mr. LEWIS OF GEORGIA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you very much for holding this hearing today.

I am particularly proud and pleased to introduce Mr. Anthony Reeves from Atlanta, Georgia to the Committee. Mr. Reeves is a survivor, a leader, an inspiration to many in my district, the State of Georgia, and across the country.

Mr. Reeves entered the Georgia foster care system at the age of 11, when his grandmother was no longer able to care for him, and his mother could not be found. While in foster care, Mr. Reeves lived in five to six different foster homes and shelters before finally receiving permanent placement and stability with Families First, a non-profit agency in Metro Atlanta that offers individuals family counseling.

Blessed by the support and guidance of two mentors, Mr. Reeves grew stronger and upon completing high school, he earned an associate's degree in electronic engineering from DeVry University.

He now works at Families First as a relief parent, where he gives back to children in the same way that his mentors did.

Mr. Reeves is also an intern consultant for the Supreme Court of the State of Georgia, Office of Child Advocacy, and he works with Metro Atlanta Youth Opportunities.

Last year, the First Lady of Georgia selected Anthony to help institute policies for foster care parents and foster care agencies. A few months later, Mr. Reeves was selected as a FosterClub All-Star. He now travels throughout the country as a foster care advocate and helps speak on behalf of youth in foster care.

Two months ago, he was more than lucky but blessed to be recognized by the Georgia State legislature who passed a resolution commending his work with foster care.

He is in the process of starting his own music group and music label and will focus on everything from rock and roll to rap. He is working on a Bachelor of Science in electronic engineering.

Mr. Reeves finds time to volunteer with a youth counselor that I have for the young people in my district in Atlanta.

Mr. Reeves, we are thankful that you are here today and we look forward to your testimony.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Mr. Reeves, thank you for coming.

STATEMENT OF ANTHONY REEVES, GEORGIA

Mr. REEVES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the Subcommittee, as well as Mr. Lewis and others, here in D.C. as well as in Atlanta.

My name is Anthony Reeves. I am 23 years of age, actually 24 now. I as well as some of my peers here, we have the experience of the foster care system. We work for it and we have also been through it. We understand everything that goes along with the foster care system.

Growing up is a big challenge for everyone. I am pretty sure like a lot of you had your parents gritting their teeth because when transitioning out, they do not know if you are going to sink or

swim, but they were still there to back you up. Even when going through your teenage phases, they still held on strong and they loved you and everything.

Often we as foster youth, we are misunderstood when we go through our normal teenage phases, and sometimes we are either put on medication, just to calm us down, or "calm us down," and that kind of takes away from the childhood experience. You are supposed to be kind of like out there but not too far.

When transitioning out into life on your own, your parents are there to help you fill out those different applications, make sure that you are buying the correct car. I know I have ran through a couple of cars because I did not know what to buy. They are even there if you need food or if you want to go back and stick your hand in the refrigerator, you can grab food out of their refrigerator.

We do not have that option. We do not have that luxury of like going back to our parents because we are in the foster care system. We cannot go back to our biological families.

When we transition out, we are basically just put in the basic survival modes, fight or flight by any means necessary.

I spent 12 years in foster care. After being abandoned by my mother, I was sent to live with my grandmother. At the time, she really was not able to care for me. I guess I was kind of like out of hand too much for her. She had already raised one so she could not go through another one.

I was sent to a shelter. Upon entering the shelter, it is almost like being sent to a jail because when I walked through those doors, I heard the door shut and lock behind me meaning I could not go back out. It gave me a fear of being in enclosed spaces.

The first couple of years, I moved around a lot. I went from shelter to foster home to foster home to shelter. It is a lot of different placements. Each time when moved around, you feel like you are being rejected by these different people and you really did not have anything to do with why you are in the system. You really do not understand, and sometimes we just buildup a big barrier, a big wall, we do not want to deal with anybody at all.

I finally found placement, permanency, in a group home. I found stability. I found a whole lot of brothers. That is what we called each other, we called each other family. I called them my family.

I still had not seen my brother for quite a bit of time, and that is even before I was sent in the system. I had not seen my brother for like probably three or 4 years. Just to let you know how valuable or how important that is to me, the times I could remember living with my mother, I was basically a father figure to my little brother.

I would clean up the house. I made sure he had something to eat. I cleaned up everything from the dishes to even picking up drug needles and pipes so that he would not stick himself or put his mouth on it because he was just a little baby. At the time, I was only like five or something like that.

As I transitioned, as I grew up, my social worker there, he finally took the time, he said I am going to go ahead and find your little brother for you. He did all the research and work and come to find out, my little brother stayed a couple of exits down the highway from me. It was kind of crazy because we were both in the same

system and he only stayed a couple of exits down, and I had not seen him for at least 4 years.

Me not seeing my brother is like you not seeing your son or seeing your daughter or someone like that. It did not make too much sense to me. That is when I found out the value of siblings being together, sibling separation.

I was lucky enough to have different mentors as well as the social worker to instill in me to keep going to school and go on to college. I did not like school or whatever.

When I was transitioning out, I had to make a choice of like college, like most people, they choose what is the best college to go to. My decision was based on who offered year round school. Let me tell you, I did not like school at all.

To try to figure out who has year round school was hard in itself because of the fact if I chose a traditional college that had summers off, that means I had to find some place to stay during the summer or else I would be homeless, and I have an extreme fear of being homeless.

Besides that, I really wanted to go to Georgia Tech because of the fact that I love basketball and I wanted to play basketball. During the summertime, what was I going to do then.

I chose to go to DeVry because I loved electronics as well. I obtained my associate's degree and I kind of transitioned out with the help of my mentors and through like a program with Metropolitan Area Youth Opportunities Initiative, I was able to get my apartment. That was a big ordeal in itself. My mother had like past due bills in my name. When I go to get my electricity and stuff turned on, I had these high deposits as well as a past due bill of $150, and I did not know.

I was kind of stuck. That almost left me homeless. If I had not had my mentors there to help me through my financial crisis, I would be stuck on the streets because of the fact that I could not afford the $179 deposit plus the $150 past due payments and everything else that goes along with that. Luckily, I had that support.

When my brother grew up in the system, he really did not have those supports. Nobody told him that he could go to college or what have you. When he turned 18, he had his bags and left. He was homeless for a good bit of time.

I let him stay with me at the college which was against all policies there. Eventually, it was like fight or flight. He ended up in jail for doing some things that he needed to do to survive, and even during that time, he fathered a child. She's beautiful. She always calls me uncle.

I guess what I would like to say today is that this decision or any decision that is made today will not affect me, it will not affect Tyler, because we have already transitioned out, but for our 20,000 other brothers and sisters that come behind us, we would like to see them have a very successful transition.

I believe we are obligated to help them because of the fact that we did not ask to be put in these situations. When you drop your little kids off at the day care center and they are grabbing and screaming and pulling on you, that just symbolizes they do not

want to be taken away or they do not want to be separated from you.

We did not want to be separated from our families. We wanted that connection. For many of us in foster care, we spent our whole lives crying for that connection.

Some things that we could do is extend foster care to the age of 21. I watch the news often. A lot of times you see like when a youth does something bad, they say if there was something that I could do to help him, I would have done it. This is something you can do, to help the youth, so you do not have to say that, if I could have or what would happen if I would have.

I just appeal to extend the support service to age 21 for all our young people in foster care. I would like the States to have more flexibility and Federal funding to support families who stay together and can share placement and recruit caring foster parents and encourage adoption while establishing permanency for youth.

I ask that you also help siblings to stay together because that is a big deal for me.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Reeves follows:]

Prepared Statement of Anthony Reeves, Georgia

Chairman McDermott, Ranking Member Weller, and members of this Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to appear before you today on behalf of my brothers and sisters in foster care who need your help to make a successful transition from foster care to adulthood.

My name is Anthony Reeves. I am 23 years old and live in Atlanta, Georgia. I have worked with the First Lady of Georgia, instituting policies for foster parents and foster agencies through the First Lady's Children's Cabinet and Project Embrace. In 2006–07, I was selected to serve as a FosterClub All-Star intern, traveling the country to motivate and educate my younger peers in foster care. Now I work for Families First as a Relief Parent (the same organization I grew up with), and with Metro Atlanta Youth Opportunities Initiative (M.A.Y.O.I.), an organization that helps current and former foster care clients that are transitioning out of the foster care system. I am working with Georgia's Supreme Court bettering life for youth transitioning from foster care. I am also in the process of starting my own music label and music group.

Growing up is a big challenge for everyone; you have your rebellious stages and your experimental stages, which I'm sure had many of your own parents gritting their teeth—but your parents were always there to forgive you. And then when you get ready to transition out of their home into a life on your own, you know that they are going to be there to help you with your rental applications and job applications, moving in to your first apartment and giving you the old pots and pans and the couch from the family room, just little things that make a big difference. Most importantly, your parents are there for you to make sure that you have food or to help if you need transportation or can't figure out how to run the dishwasher. Whether the challenges are big or small, your mom or dad will try and help you.

Growing up in foster care is so much harder because when we foster youth go through our normal teenage phases, we are usually living with people who do not know us very well, or we might even be in a placement where our caretakers or staff may be quite disconnected from us. We are often punished for doing the things that most teenagers do, and may even be put on medication as a means to calm us down or as a consequence.

Then, when we are transitioning out of care into a life on our own, we have to be nothing short of perfect, because we don't have our parents to help us move in and show us how to fill out applications. Most of us aren't allowed to get a drivers license, so we are stuck without transportation if we are in rural areas. Life is tough because we are really put in the most basic of survival modes, "fight or flight," "by any means necessary."

I spent 12 years in care. I entered foster care after being abandoned by my mother and having a grandmother unable to adequately care for me. The first couple of years I moved around a lot and led a very lonely and unstable life growing up. Then

I was placed in a group home which was bitter sweet. I found some stability, but I lost all contact with my little brother for who I served as a parent to during our younger years. During that time, I would clean the house, do dishes, make sure we had food, and even cleaned up drug paraphernalia to make sure the home was safe for us. I was only 5 years old.

It took the social worker of the group home—now a mentor and permanent father figure in my life to me—to finally do everything in his power to locate my brother. After a diligent search by mentor, I came to find out my brother had lived just a few exits down the highway from me for at least three years. When I finally found my little brother, I began to understand the importance of staying connected to my sibling.

With the support of my mentor, I was motivated and encouraged enough to graduate high school and go on to college. After high school, I had to make a choice of which colelge to attend. Unlike most youth or teenagers who transition out of their family's house, their decision is mainly based on who has the best school. Mine, on the other hand, was based on who offered school year round. The reason? If I went to a traditional college then I would have to worry about where I was going to sleep for the summer (I have an extreme fear of being homeless). It was a tough decision, because in addition to a talent a technology, I also had a love for basketball and I really wanted to wear the gold and black colors for Georgia Tech.

I achieved my Associates degree at DeVry University and now I am working on my Bachelors degree in Electronic Engineering. I have my apartment—which was drama in itself—because I was unaware and ill prepared for the expenses that come with getting your first apartment, and because my biological mom has past due bills that she had placed in my name. These challenges almost left me homeless. With the help pf my mentor, I was able to overcome these obstacles and get my own apartment.

However, when I re-connected with my brother, I realized how truly dangerous transitioning is for some foster youth who cannot make their way safely to adulthood. Some of us get lucky and can find the support and resources we need when transitioning out of care, but some of us don't.

When my brother transitioned out at 18, he had not found the stability I had found or connected with supportive adults in his life that could provide the type of mentorship that I relied on. With no guidance, he never attained his high school diploma or G.E.D. He fathered a child. From there, things kind of fell apart for him, and then he became homeless. With a criminal record and no education, it is now almost impossible for him to get a decent job.

We are two brothers in foster care with different experiences and luck and very different outcomes. What is important to me now is not to take chances with all my other brothers and sisters—about 20,000 this year alone— transitioning out of foster care. While my transition won't be affected, I hope to improve the odds for successful transitioning for all foster youth coming up behind me.

Changes must be made because we, young people in foster care, do not ask to be put in the system. When you drop your child off at the day care, they usually cry their lungs out, signifying that most children don't want to be away from their family. For many of us in foster care, we spent our childhood quietly crying for family. Life is tough enough when transitioning out of care, and it is even tougher if you don't have the support that you need from people who care about you, or if you don't have resources and skills packed along with the rest of your belongings as you are shown out the door.

The child welfare system—the people who decide to place us in foster care *for our own good*—have a responsibility to help guide us into a stable adult life. I think that if we were able to receive support up until age 21, or even until we finish a college education or a training program, that transition to adulthood would be way more successful for many of us.

I appeal to Congress to extend support services to the age of 21 for all young people in foster care across the country. I recommend that Congress extend eligibility for the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to youth under age 25, which should include eligibility for room and board and for education and training vouchers.

It is also my dream that every young person in foster care is provided with support from adults in their lives like I was. I believe it made all the difference in my life, and led to the divergent paths between my brother and me. I would like states to have flexibility in federal funding to support families staying together in the first place or to reunite families that can safely and healthily be back together. Flexible funding could support kinship placement for children within their families, recruit caring foster parents, and encourage more adoptions—establishing permanency for our youth. Providing states with more flexibility in federal funding would help fami-

lies stay together or be created—so siblings, like my brother and me—could walk the same successful path to adulthood *together*.

Thank you for opportunity to speak with you today.

Anthony Reeves

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Thank you very much. Nicole Dobbins is from my area of the country. You have already been introduced by your school that gave some money to get you here, and we welcome you here.

Nicole has been in and out of foster care for six years. She is 24. In June 2006, she graduated from Oregon State with a Bachelor's degree in exercise and sports science.

I suspect you are an athlete more or less. We welcome you here and it is your turn to tell your story. Thank you for coming.

STATEMENT OF NICOLE DOBBINS, OREGON

Ms. DOBBINS. Chairman McDermott, thank you for making us so welcome. Ranking Member Weller and Members of the Subcommittee, I thank you for hearing my testimony on behalf of the 24,000 teens aging out of the foster care system each year.

Good morning. My name is Nicole Marie Dobbins. Like Chairman McDermott said, I am 24 years old. I am a former foster youth and a life long resident of Portland, Oregon.

I spent a total of 6 years on and off in the State foster care system, entering at the age of two with my younger sister, due to my mother's drug addiction and inability to care for us.

My sister and I were reunited after a couple of years with my bio mom, but only to be put back in foster care at the age of 14 due to other issues, and again, drug abuse on my mother's behalf.

Foster care is where I remained for the next 4 years until only 1 day after graduating high school, I was kicked out of my foster home, a place I had been living in for 2 years prior. I was forced to hand over my key with no explanation of what was going on other than now I was 18, graduated, and not allowed to stay any longer.

I did not attend any closing court hearing nor did I receive any farewell from my caseworker. I recall having a meeting a week or so later in which they asked me what I planned to do, as if I were to have all the answers at that time.

This is how I exited the foster care system, and on that note, I was expected to be an adult. Sadly, the State played no active role in my transition. I was 18 years old and homeless, without any permanent connections to adults in my life, I had no one and there was no one to understand my struggle. I was forced to find a way all on my own.

The difficult part was not that I was homeless or that I was kicked out. The difficult part was I thought I had found someone in my foster mother that would be there for me beyond foster care and be there for me in the long run through trials and tribulations.

I was wrong, and now I had to figure it out on my own. At 18, I was not prepared for the loss of adult support.

Growing up in and out of the system provided me with little stability and poor connections to people who cared about me. I left fos-

ter care hurt and angry. I longed for someone to be that person I could rely on. I longed for a healthy family. I longed for what every child longs for. I longed to be loved.

I found hope and stability and education because when I had nothing else, I always turned to that for an escape.

When I was only 10 years old, I was in the fourth grade. I knew I wanted to go to college, not because I wanted to be anything special or because of any one particular thing fascinated me. I wanted to go to college so that I could support my family and be a role model to my younger sister. Mostly, because I did not want to end up like my mother.

I knew I had to take a path my mother did not. She never graduated from high school, which made me the first in my family to get a high school diploma.

At the age of 18, I made the transition from foster care to what caseworkers call "independence." With the plan in mind to attend college, I was accepted into Oregon State University. However, there was one huge problem. I was now a graduate of high school and homeless.

It was only June and school did not start until September. Before I would ever see college, I had to get through the Summer. It was a struggle that I managed to tackle.

In some ways, education saved my life. I felt very blessed to have my financial needs for school met. I am thankful for the resources such as Chafee educational training vouchers, which was a huge help to me and lessened my stress in receiving that each year.

However, these resources were not given to me at the time of transition. I had to seek them out after my sophomore year in college.

Education alone was never enough. I was a freshman in dorms with many new friends and excited about the opportunity to start a new life. Externally, I appeared to be happy, but what I kept from everyone was how I felt inside.

I was sad and lonely and hurting and often cried myself to sleep. I was too scared to ask for help and too proud to say I needed any. My peers did not understand me. They had family visiting and care packages arriving when I barely had people calling and checking in on me.

It was not long before I was diagnosed with depression. I dealt with depression without any medication because I had no health coverage. I was diagnosed by the Student Health Services and allotted five free counseling visits based on the student health fees that I paid to go to Oregon State.

I purchased a month's worth of medication but chose not to take them based on knowing that I would not have the financial commitment to continue the education, so I did not want to cause more harm to the depression than already was there.

I am one of the youth that could have benefited from Representative Cardoza's bill for health insurance to be used in foster care. That is something I would like to see put in place so that youth like myself will not have to struggle as much as I did.

Take this journey with me, as I recall one of the hardest times in college. Being kicked out of the dorms for the holidays. Thanksgiving came around and I did not realize I was going to have to

leave until a week beforehand. My new friends all had family plans and I was not about to be anyone's burden by asking to join.

On holidays, I waited. I waited to be asked over to friends' houses. Looking back, I was thankful that I always was asked. Now I cannot help but wonder and I hope you do, too, where do youth go when they do not get asked?

I owe great gratitude to organizations such as FosterClub and the National Foster Care Coalition for offering an outlet for me to make change in the child welfare system.

Before my work with FosterClub, I never heard of permanency. I have now learned what permanency means and because of that, I have been given the chance to establish it in my own life.

Permanency just does not appear. It is nurtured. As foster youth, we do not know what healthy relationships look like. It is up to someone to teach us.

I have been given the divine opportunity to change child welfare professionals around the importance of permanency, as well as share my own experience with thousands of foster youth around the Nation because of these organizations.

Now I have acquired a huge network of supportive people in my life and I can honestly say that today, I would not be sitting here a college graduate, an educated professional, without the support and love from adults currently in my life.

I pose this question or these questions. What about the youth currently in care scheduled to transition without permanent families, without support, without health care, without education, and without a plan or worse, without anyone at all?

What will we do for them? I want to remind you this is only my story.

I want to thank you for listening to my testimony and I want to thank you on behalf of all the foster youth transitioning. You have the chance to make a difference. I just want to thank you again for hearing us.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Dobbins follows:]

Prepared Statement of Nicole Dobbins, Oregon

Chairman McDermott, Ranking Member Weller, and members of this Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to appear before you today on behalf of the 24,000 teens who will age out of foster care this year without a family or the supports and services they need to make a successful transition to adulthood. I hope my story helps inform the subcommittee on ways that Congress can improve the system.

My name is Nicole Dobbins. I am 24 years old and a lifelong resident of Portland, Oregon. At age 2, I entered the State foster care system. I was reunited with my biological family only to reenter the system again at the age of 14. While in foster care, I adjusted to my new living arrangements and persisted with my studies until I became first in my family to graduate from high school. My sights and hopes were set on a college degree. Applications made, I was accepted to Oregon State University and looking forward to beginning my freshman year in higher education.

Then, my great shock: at age 18, only *one* day after graduating high school, I was kicked out of my foster home without warning. My relationship as a "ward of the State of Oregon" was over. This is how I exited the foster care system. Sadly, my state played little role in my transition, although I was very grateful to receive Chafee Educational And Training Voucher funds for college. I spent my senior year in high school focusing on my studies and had not focused on what life on my own would be like. I had made no preparations. I had little support and no place to call home.

Age 18, college bound, and completely on my own, I made my way to college. I found myself in a new place with no one I knew. I had little guidance for what the

process of college was like and how lonely my journey was going to be. The most difficult part of it all was that I had no connections to any supportive adults in my life. I had no relationship with my biological family and my only sibling stayed in the same foster home I was kicked out of, which made it difficult to stay in contact with her. I was focused on school, but I soon learned that life for an 18 year old wasn't easy without support. School was hard; I was lonely, and very unhappy.

As a sophomore I was diagnosed with depression. I had no health insurance and worse off, I had no one to turn to. The only support I had was from my peers, who couldn't help or offer the support I needed. For the most part they just didn't understand. I was feeling like my life had no direction, and no purpose. Being depressed in college was debilitating and very difficult for me to manage alone. I wish that I could have had better support through this time of difficulty. I waited in limbo for a friend to extend an invitation as I wondered where I would go for Holidays and school breaks.

It would have been very beneficial if I had been given help in establishing some sort of permanency before my transition into adulthood. At eighteen, I was not prepared for the loss I had to face, the loss of the adult supports in my life. I felt very blessed to have most of my financial needs for school met, but at the same time I needed love, support, and encouragement as well, just like any young adult, and especially as a young adult transitioning from foster care.

Somehow along the way I had the good fortune to find FosterClub who took me in as an All-Star intern. Along with the National Foster Care Coalition, FosterClub offers encouragement and an outlet for me to make change in the child welfare system. Before my work began with these organizations I hated the system and felt ashamed to say that I was ever apart of it. However, through training and adult support, I have now learned what permanency means and I have established it in my own life. I presently have many support systems and I am now a college graduate!

In my experiences advocating for foster care reform, I have had the opportunity to share my story with thousands of youth around the nation and to speak with people who can improve life for my younger peers still coming through the system. Recently, I went to Capitol Hill, along with over thirty of my peers from foster care, and met with Members of Congress. I spoke at an event sponsored by the Kids *Are Waiting,* a project of The Pew Charitable Trusts, as part of its campaign calling for reform of the federal financing system for foster care. The Campaign and Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative recently released a report which reveals how flexible, reliable federal funding, would enable States to keep families together, recruit more foster and adoptive parents, or subsidize guardianships for relatives and others.

As a nation, we must do a better job of making certain that youth in foster care have family relationships and are prepared for adulthood. As people with the power to make change, I ask that you take an active interest in the need for foster youth to establish permanency before they exit foster care and ensure that they have support and services as transitioning young adults so that they can have a less risky and less despondent transition than I did myself. Every day we fail to act, 67 children like me leave foster care without a safety net.

Thank you for this opportunity and for taking the time to hear my testimony.

Respectfully,

Nicole Dobbins

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Thank you for telling your story.

Mr. Weller.

Mr. WELLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Do you want to introduce Mr. Nutall?

Mr. WELLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is a pleasure for me to welcome and introduce Jamaal Nutall before our Subcommittee. As I noted in my opening state, Jamaal is a resident of Joliet, the largest city in the congressional district that I have the privilege of representing.

He has been an intern in our Washington office this Summer, and I am proud to say he has made a terrific contribution to our Congressional office.

He is a great intern. He is a young man with tremendous potential. He currently attends University of St. Francis where he will receive a degree in social work in May of 2008, after which he plans to pursue a Master's degree in school social work.

He is a member of the University's football team, a member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, and an active member of the Student African American Brotherhood.

I want to welcome Jamaal and thank him for agreeing to appear before our Subcommittee this morning.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to your testimony, Jamaal.

STATEMENT OF JAMAAL NUTALL, ILLINOIS

Mr. NUTALL. Chairman McDermott, Ranking Member Weller, and Members of the Committee, good morning.

It is an honor for me to testify before the Committee today on child welfare.

My name is Jamaal Nutall and I live in Mr. Weller's Congressional district. I know a lot about the foster care system because I was a part of that system for about 10 years. In addition, I attend the University of St. Francis where I plan to receive my Bachelor's degree in social work in May of 2008.

I also plan to work in the system to help kids by advising, mentoring, coaching and setting a good example. I would do so by receiving my Master's degree in school social work the following year after graduation.

Imagine for a moment being a kid at age 8 one day playing with your toys at home and wake up the next day in someone else's house. How would this make you feel? That is what happened to me.

Before that day, I was living with my grandmother, as I had been for most of my life, and there were problems between my grandmother and my mother, which was my mother actually suffered from post-partum depression after giving birth to her first child, which was a baby girl, my only sister, which now I am the only child because my mother actually killed my sister, but I always forgave her for that. My father was never in my life.

Overnight, I was placed in a foster care situation. In hindsight, my grandmother was trying to protect me. However, the foster care system could have done a better job. For one thing, they could have reached out to my extended family to see if I could have lived with any of them.

The foster care home I was placed in, Henry and Dorthea Burton, they did the best they could. They fed me, tried to instill good values, and took me to church. What they could not do was change the environment outside the house.

On the south side of Chicago, kids can stay in the house or choose friends. Friends can be a positive or negative influence. The friends I chose at the time were not a very good influence. I made some bad choices like not going to school and not studying at all, and pretty much depending on myself at the time, which is tough for a young kid.

The street life corrupted me to the point that I was stealing, involved in robberies, burglaries, and even selling drugs. I can that

I was money hungry at that age. I was so bad that I was out of control.

During sixth grade, a social worker told me that we were going to her office to wrap Christmas presents. That is not what happened. Instead, I was taken to a group home and once again was in one home one day and another home the next day.

At the group home, I was fortunate to meet up with a counselor who had faith in me and a teacher who told me I was smart and I was going to do good things. I also was able to take advantage of an reward system in place at the group home that gave more responsibility and freedom to those who had good behavior. I did more, more than most.

During all this time, my mother was appearing in court trying to regain custody. My aunt and other family visited at holidays and brought me items like shoes and clothing. I was not completely cut off from my family although most of the other foster kids never saw or heard from family members.

After a couple of years in the group home, one of my aunts became my legal guardian. I would like to express my gratitude to her for that. She was determined to make me a better person. She told me what to do and what not to do. She taught me how to wash clothes, manage money, and reach goals.

She took me to church and helped me find my first job. Her daughter, which is my cousin, became my older sister, who has helped me so much over the past few years.

It was in high school that sports became a big part of my life. This really was a positive experience for me as I learned about team work, responsibility, leadership, and made very good friends.

Sports also helped me with college, as I was awarded a football scholarship. Being in sports kept me busy and kept me from hanging out with the wrong people. All kids need an opportunity to keep busy, whether it is an after school program, Young Men's Christian Association, Boys and Girls Club, or interested parents.

By the time I transitioned into adulthood, I was depending on myself, my family and my friends. This combination of support helped keep me motivated and contributed to my knowing that I can do anything I want.

That is a great feeling. One day and one time I never knew I would have. I feel blessed by my experiences. Most kids growing up like I did do not make it. I was able to learn from each of my experiences and allow them to contribute to who I am today.

Now I am looking forward to changing the world. I started with myself first and will take it one person at a time.

As I look over my life, I would not change many things but some. My struggles only made me stronger as a person. I learned how to become a man the hard way. Through these challenges I learned responsibility, respect, hard work, dedication and I learned from my mistakes. I also developed lifelong friendships with many.

I would like to express my gratitude to those who have given me the opportunity to better myself.

I have a lot of suggestions for improving the foster care system that would include treating foster care kids as people rather than as cases that need to be moved along quickly to clear off a desk. Placing foster care kids with family members if at all possible.

Better screening of foster parents, trying to keep kids in the same school rather than bouncing them around from school to school, and I encourage foster parents to monitor kids in their care.

Thank you for this opportunity. I am glad to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Nutall follows:]

Prepared Statement of Jamaal Nutall, Illinois

Chairman McDermott, Ranking Member Weller and Members of the Committee, good morning. It is an honor for me to testify before the Committee today on foster care. My name is Jamaal Nutall and I live in Mr. Weller's Congressional district. I know a lot about the foster care system because I was part of that system for about 10 years. In addition, I attend the University of Saint Francis where I plan to receive my Bachelor Degree of Social Work in May of 2008. I also plan to work in the system to help kids by advising, mentoring, coaching, and setting a good example. I would do so by receiving my Masters Degree in school social work the following year after graduation.

Imagine for a moment being a kid at age 8 who one day is playing with his toys at home and wakes up the next day in someone else's house. How would you feel? That's what happened to me.

Before that day I was living with my grandmother, as I had been for most of my life, and there were problems between my grandmother and my mother. Overnight I was placed in a foster family situation. In hindsight, my grandmother was trying to protect me. However, the foster care system could have done a better job. For one thing, they could have reached out to my extended family to see if I could have lived with any of them.

In the foster care home I was placed in Henry and Dorthea Burton did the best they could. They fed me well, tried to instill good values, and took me to church. What they couldn't do was change the environment outside the house. On the south side of Chicago, kids can stay in the house or choose friends. Friends can be a positive or a negative influence. The friends I chose at that time were not very good influences. I made some bad choices—like not going to school and not studying at all—and pretty much depended on myself at that time, which is tough for a young kid.

The street life corrupted me to the point that I was stealing, involved in robberies, and selling drugs. I can say that I was money hungry. I was so bad that I was out of control.

During 6th grade, a social worker told me we were going to her office to wrap presents. That's not what happened. Instead I was taken to a group home and once again was in one "home" one day, another "home" the next day.

At the group home I was fortunate to meet up with a counselor who had faith in me and a teacher who told me I was smart and I was going to do good things. I also was able to take advantage of a reward system in place at the group home that gave more responsibility and freedom to those who had good behavior. I did more, more than most.

During all this time, my mother was appearing in court, trying to regain custody. My aunt and other family visited at the holidays and brought me items like shoes and clothing. So I wasn't completely cut off from my family, though most of the other foster kids never saw or heard from a family member.

After a couple of years in the group home, one of my aunts became my legal guardian. I would like to express my gratitude to her for that. She was determined to make me a better person. She told me what to do and what not to do. She taught me how to wash clothes, manage money, and reach goals. She took me to church and helped me find my first job. Her daughter, my cousin, became my older sister who has helped me so much over the past few years.

It was in high school that sports became a big part of my life. This really was a positive experience for me as I learned about teamwork, responsibility, and leadership and made very good friends. Sports also helped me with college as I was awarded a football scholarship. Being in sports kept me busy and kept me from hanging out with the wrong people. All kids need an opportunity to keep busy, whether it be in an after school program, a YMCA, a boys and girls club, or interested parents.

By the time I transitioned into adulthood, I was depending on myself, my family, and my friends. This combination of support helped keep me motivated and contributed to my knowing that I can do anything I want. That's a great feeling—one that at one time I never knew I would have.

I feel blessed by my experiences. Most kids growing up like I did don't make it. I was able to learn from each of my experiences and allow them to contribute to who I am today. Now I am looking forward to changing the world. I started with myself first and will take it one person at a time.

As I look over my life I would not change many things but some. My struggles only made me stronger as a person. I learned how to become a man the hard way. Through these challenges I learned responsibility, respect, hard work, dedication, and I learned from my mistakes. I also developed life long friendships with many. I would like to express my gratitude to those who given me the opportunity to better myself.

I have a lot of suggestions for improving the foster care system. That would include treating foster care kids as people rather than as cases that need to be moved along quickly to clear off a desk, placing foster care kids with family members if at all possible, better screening of foster parents, trying to keep kids in the same school rather than bouncing them around from school to school, and encouraging foster parents to monitor kids in their care.

Thank you for this opportunity. I'll be glad to answer any questions you may have.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. We want to thank all four of you for your stories. I have just one question I would like to ask all four of you and you can think while somebody else is answering.

Who was the person and what did they do that had the most impact on stabilizing you coming out of foster care or living through foster care? Any one of you can start. I would like to hear who the person was and how you got in touch with them.

Mr. NUTALL. For me, I believe my family, my aunt, my biological aunt, which took me out of the system, which I appreciate so much. I had many coaches and mentors in my life that preached to me positive, be positive and you will prosper from your positive actions.

Just taking me out of the system, I was encouraged to actually do better for myself instead of hanging around the streets and doing wrong all the time, I was encouraged to read a book, actually do better for myself, or play sports, so I can utilize my talent. I ended up being very talented at any sport I tried. I was naturally athletic.

When I got to college, I had many older fraternity members which recruited me and gave me the opportunity to network and brotherhood and draw me in and became my immediate family. That's pretty much it.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Tell me who was the person that turned you around?

Mr. REEVES. My situation is kind of two people plus myself. In the group home, the social worker there helped find my brother. I call him all the time now because I work for the same agency that I grew up with. He is like my father. I call him. He actually helped me furnish my apartment and everything. I still call him to this day. We sit down and talk about anything. He helped motivate me to go on through high school or to finish high school and go on to college. He was even there at all of my graduations.

There was another lady that I met. She was my mentor. She took the place as my mother. She was also there. She helped me with my deposits, the security deposit that was $250. She told me what to do as far as my identity from my biological mom for the $150.

They also instilled in me that I have to set an example for not only the brother that my mentor found but my other two siblings that I did not know that I had. They said I had to set that example for myself as well as for them.

They really became like my driving force and they still are pushing me. As a matter of fact, they probably are going to call me right after this.

Ms. DOBBINS. For me, it was never just one person. I just cannot help but think about it takes a village to raise a child. There were different people along the way, but there was not one consistent person.

Definitely some of the things that helped were being placed with my sister in the same foster home. It was a familiar face. It was someone who helped me through the times, even though we were not the best of sisters through foster care, she helped me through, just being placed with someone I knew.

There were various people through high school and friends' parents. It was never one consistent person. I think had it been, it could have been an easier transition. I think a lot of us said a lot of things that were a struggle because that is the way to make the system better, we reported our struggles, but I think a lot of people played a part in supporting us or supporting me at least during different times. It just was not a consistent thing.

Mr. BACON. I do not know if I can say one person. When I grew up in foster care, I struggled with trust issues. I had that wall, that barrier, that I put up because I was afraid that people would come into my life and leave me. I figured if my family left me, other people would leave me.

I contribute a lot of my success to my advocacy that I do. I go out and I speak and I advocate for foster youth because that helps me understand what I am going through and helps me deal with what I am going through.

I am able to go out there and make a difference for those growing up under me so they do not have to struggle. I contribute a lot of the success to a lot of the agencies that I work with, and a lot of the other foster care alumni, such as Nicole and Anthony, that advocate with me because I know in the middle of the night, if I have an issue, if I am dealing with some type of problem, I know I can pick up the phone and call one of them, no matter what time it is, they will pick up the phone. They may have to wake up a little, but they will be there to pick up the phone.

That is how all foster youth feel. We feel that natural connection with aeach other. As soon as we find out you are a foster youth, it is that natural bond. It is a family bond.

I contribute my success to my advocacy and all the foster youth that I have been in touch with and that I advocate for and the agencies that give us such support and fulfilling our passions in life and helping us move forward, giving us that little tough love sometimes when we need it and that push to keep us moving forward instead of staying in one spot.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Mr. Weller?

Mr. WELLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Jamaal, you stated in your testimony that you suggest children in foster care should be

living with family members whenever possible. You shared some of your experience.

Can you elaborate a little more on the difference you feel from speaking with your peers as well as from your own personal experience about the difference between being with family members and outside the family?

Mr. NUTALL. I think the family system is a more genuine support system than a foster care system. The foster care system is basically based on stipends paying for individuals to actually stay in your home. You get parents who do not really care about the kids at all, all they care about is that payment and do not really take care of these kids.

In a blood line family, they will do to their best ability, not even your mother and father, you have cousins, aunts, many relatives that will look out for you because you are a part of their blood line.

Family structure is basically based on like a long life line, you always have your family to look back on. If you can call anybody, it is your family. If all else fails, your family is going to be there for you through anything.

Like the saying says, blood is thicker than water. That is true. Your blood will never lead you astray. That is the reason why kids are aging out of the system at 18, these foster parents are afraid to adopt kids. All they really care about is these payments. I am not going to say that for all foster parents. There are some excellent foster parents out there.

Everyone is not fortunate to actually have a foster parent that will actually take care of them and make sure they go through college, connect with them, and adjoin them to their family. It seems like they are afraid of foster care.

Same reason why younger kids are most likely to be adopted than older kids. They feel like they can actually connect with younger kids and kind of manipulate them to be a part of their family instead of an older kid that is stubborn, knows their family and wants to go back with their family.

Mr. WELLER. Jamaal, in your experiences, you talked about moving around. When you moved around, did you move from one school to another, you were changing schools while you were young?

Mr. NUTALL. Yes, I did. Numerous schools. I felt like that really affected my education. I feel like I really did not become more educated until I reached college. The college level actually opened up my mind to different areas and kind of exposed me to grammar and all this stuff that I was kind of lacking.

Just from switching schools, you go to a school that really does not teach you as much and then move to a school that is really grounded in grammar, emphasis of educating you strong, but you lack the skills that you should have learned earlier.

I ended up failing one of the grades when I was younger because I lacked the understanding of how to actually read fully, how to understand words.

Mr. WELLER. In your life time, how many schools did you attend during the age of eight and when you entered St. Francis University?

Mr. NUTALL. I do not know if it is accurate, six/seven, could be eight.

Mr. WELLER. Did you find every time that you began attending another school, it took a while just to get established there and develop relationships and figure it out?

Mr. NUTALL. Yes, it is a major problem. You lose your friends that you try to create a bond with, and then you move along to somewhere else, you create new friends, and then you move on again. Do I keep these friends or should I just toss them. You are never going to see them again.

It is hard on kids to go through this process. It is one of the hardest things you could do.

Mr. WELLER. Would you think it is a good idea for us to find ways to help ensure that children in foster care are able to continue attending the same school that they were in previously, so they do not have to go through that transition?

Is that something you think is a good idea?

Mr. NUTALL. Definitely. I think that would help. From coming from different hearings, I heard different proposals as grants being proposed to schools like private schools or public schools that actually allow foster youth to attend that same school even if they are moved or something like that.

Get the structure right. That would help tremendously in the future of a youth. They will get a chance to actually bond with friends they want to bond with, and get the support system they need at a school, instead of moving around to different schools. Then you start losing faith and trust.

That is why you have kids that do not really trust their teachers or do not listen because they really do not care. They moved from this part and this part. It really does not matter.

Until recent, school was not a big thing for me. I really did not like school. School was never—I never saw myself going to college. I always thought that maybe I would do something else with my life, but I got into sports, and that kind of opened the door for choices.

Even when I applied to colleges, I never thought that I could actually get in the colleges I got into. I got into at least nine different schools. I was very impressed by that. Six was because of academics and three was because of football.

I had my options to actually choose a school to go to, which my family really disapproved of St. Francis because it was still in Joliet, but I really thought the smaller environment would be better for me. I had time to actually study and be coached, and actually listen to people, instead of going somewhere big where there was the possibility I could drop out because of partying at big schools is more dominant.

Mr. WELLER. Jamaal, you have done a great job. I am very proud of you and how you presented yourself today. Thank you for appearing before the Subcommittee.

Mr. NUTALL. Thank you.

Mr. WELLER. I know my time has expired.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Mr. Lewis, do you have a question?

Mr. LEWIS OF GEORGIA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am not so sure that I have any questions. I do not feel adequate really to ask questions.

I want to thank each of you for being here today, for telling your story with such courage. It is my hope that it will help educate and sensitize all of us. I know it will help me a great deal.

The four of you are really heroes for being able to survive and not giving up, not giving in. You do not appear to be bitter or hostile. I do not know what I would have done if I had to go through what you have gone through.

I just want to thank you for being here today. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Thank you all four for coming. We want you to know that what you tell us, we will try to deal with. It is important for you to come and publicly say it. You have done us a real service. Thank you.

Mr. MEEK. I am sorry, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Excuse me.

Mr. MEEK. No. I stepped in when you were making closing comments. I was in the back here. I am sorry. You know how it is, trying to juggle meetings here.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Go ahead.

Mr. MEEK. I know there were a couple of recommendations that were made and I know there are two States that have extended foster care assistance beyond 21 to 23. I think it is Colorado and another State which escapes me at this time.

I think it is important as we look at this extended care, and Mr. Chairman, you talked in your opening comments about the $36,000 that an average kid receives. I was jokingly saying I just got that last year.

[Laughter.]

I think it is important as it relates to young adult care. I know many of the Members, and I overheard as I was back here in a meeting in another room, many of the Members commending you for coming before the Committee. I think it is important to open your lives up and share so we can learn, so we can avoid the situations that you all have gone through.

As it relates to the health care that was mentioned in all of your testimony, extension of health care, and also making sure there was assistance for like some sort of family assistance after the age of 18, how do you legislate. It is very difficult for us to kind of legislate that process.

The unification with family, need it be cousins or nephews or nieces, and I know in some instances, Tyler, you tried to do it and it did not work out the way it was supposed to.

What are some best practices? I am sorry. Maybe it was already answered and I was out of the room. What are some of the best practices that you all have found talking to other folks in other parts of the country?

You have an opportunity that I have not had even as a Member of Congress to come before Congress and share your thoughts and ideas.

Hearing some of the people that you have talked to after they are 18, after they go through that kind of sink or swim effect in the

deep water, what have been some of the things that have worked for others that have not worked for you that you wish could have worked for you or that we can endorse?

Ms. DOBBINS. I would like to say that I have done 25 trainings in the State of Oregon around permanency, and this is something I get asked often, and I would like you to take a look at not all or nothing, so necessarily you cannot place a youth with a family member or if you cannot establish some sort of family, that does not mean that you do not nurture the relationship still.

For me, I had relatives living 20 minutes away. For whatever reasons, I was not placed with them. Nurturing those relationships and even with my grandmother who was out of State could have been possible support for me as I exited the foster care system.

Looking at it as not all or nothing is a very good approach in figuring out what ways to nurture the relationships that do exist with family members that are healthy members of the family.

Mr. MEEK. Presently today, I guess you would say that there is not a system in place, and I know many States are doing different things, a system in place when they see 18 approaching, someone, a caseworker, someone identifying family members.

Now this person is kind of an adult, you can brush your own teeth and do all those kinds of things, and you do not have to worry about the guardian, do not leave the house after 8:00 kind of thing.

These are young adults, matching them up with blood relatives. I take it that does not exist today and is something that can be explored?

Ms. DOBBINS. Not as much as it should. It did not exist in my case.

Mr. BACON. I just want to speak on that, too. A lot of situations, the option of putting them back in the family is not a safe situation, in my instance. One of the things we need to look at is developing programs to set up foster youth with mentors before they turn 18.

A lot of the situations, they wait until they turn 18 and we forget in years growing up, at 16/17, you learn more. That is the age that you learn more. You are more able to take more in and you are more acceptable to help.

We need to look at those ages as providing help for youth at those ages. We need to set youth up with if not supportive adults, supportive foster care alumni. I know there are several, like myself, foster care alumni, that would willingly go in and help develop mentoring programs for foster youth.

That is one of the things that we need to look at, getting the foster care alumni into the mentoring stages for foster youth because again, like I said, previously when a foster youth meets another foster youth, they have that automatic bond.

When you set up a foster youth with a mentor who has not experienced the foster care system, the first thing in the foster youth's thoughts is you do not know where I am coming from, how can you help me.

When you set them up with a foster youth, that thought may come up but we are able to say, hey, I have been through the foster

care system. I know what you are going through and I am a prime example of how you can succeed.

We can also provide tough love for foster youth. A lot of foster youth when they are set up with a mentor who has not experienced the foster care system, they give excuses. When they give excuses to other foster youth, no, that is not an excuse. We have been through that, too, look, we have made it and this is how you make it through.

I am a big advocate and I think until we get foster care alumni in as mentors and to assist and work within the foster care system and the child welfare agencies within each State, the major changes will not be done. We need to get foster care alumni.

We do not need to wait for foster care alumni to come to us. We need to seek them out and give them an invitation to come and help us in the foster care system to make the change.

When a foster youth is given the opportunity to make a difference, they are more than willing to accept it. A lot of foster youth struggle to make a change because they do not know how to and they are waiting for someone to ask them.

Mr. MEEK. Thank you all very much. Mr. Chairman, this is kind of the two outfielders and the ball falling between the two outfielders kind of situation.

This is my first time on the Committee on Ways and Means, after being here three terms, but I think it is important as we start to look at how we can make life better, there has to be incentives for not only those that have gone through it with different kinds of experiences—I have been a State legislator in Florida when you were in the system.

Knowing what I needed to know, just having one house down from where I grew up a foster home, and meeting and playing with all the friends as I was coming up as a young person does not qualify me to know all I need to know.

I think the young adult mentoring piece is very, very important, and also making sure that we provide that opportunity. Many parents and young professionals say I can barely take care of myself, how can I go—maybe with a young adult, it is a different kind of experience and something that I think we could possibly work with.

Thank you for your testimony. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. We thank you very much for coming. Unfortunately, you have heard the bells go off and we are going to have to go over and vote. We have three votes which should bring us back around 12:30.

I would ask the panel if they would go get a little lunch and we will see you back at 12:30. Thank you very much.

[Recess.]

Chairman MCDERMOTT. We will come back to order. Thank you for waiting. I hope you enjoyed a sumptuous and elegant lunch in the Longworth Dining Room. Maybe you went to the Rayburn one where they have carpeting.

We are back here to finish. We have lost the crowd, unfortunately. We are glad to have you here because you can give us some practical suggestions about what needs to be done.

We have Cornelia Ashby, who is the Director of Education, Workforce, and Income Security at the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) that goes out and sorts out what is going on.

Dr. Courtney, who is the Ballmer Chair in Child Well-Being at the School of Social Work at the University of Washington.

Gary Stangler, who is Executive Director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, and Sam Cobbs, Executive Director of First Place Fund for Youth in Oakland, and Jane Soltis, who is the Program Officer for the Eckerd Family Foundation.

We want to thank you all for coming. Your full state will be put in the record. We would like you to try and hold to 5 minutes for whatever comments you want to make out of your full states.

Thank you.

STATEMENT OF CORNELIA ASHBY, DIRECTOR, EDUCATION, WORKFORCE AND INCOME SECURITY, U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

Ms. ASHBY. Mr. Chairman and Mr. Weller, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss services for youth who age out of the foster care system without the support of an adoptive or other permanent home.

Overall, Federal funding for State independent living programs doubled with the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act. While we could not determine the exact amount of funding States had available to spend on each eligible youth because of the lack of data on eligible youth emancipated from foster care, data available at the time of our 2004 report indicated that States' maximum funding allocation for each eligible youth in the foster care system ranged from between $476 and $2,300.

Some States were not able to spend all of their Federal allocations in the first 2 years of increased funding under the program. For example, in 2001, 20 States returned nearly $10 million in Federal funding to HHS, and in 2002, 13 States returned more than $4 million. Data provided in A July 2007 Congressional Research Service Memo to Congress shows that nine States returned less than 1 percent of total Chafee funding in 2004.

While States expanded and improved independent living services, under the Chafee program, States differed in the proportion of eligible youth served. In our 2004 survey, 40 States reported serving about 44 percent of eligible youth in their States. About one-third of reporting States were serving less than half of their eligible foster care youth while an equal percentage was serving three-fourths or more. Certain gaps in the availability of critical services were reported, which may explain at least in part why more eligible youth were not served. For example, States continued to be challenged in providing youth with a smooth transition between the youth and adult mental health systems. Of the four States we visited in 2004, three cited difficulties due to more stringent eligibility requirements in the adult system, different levels of services and long waiting lines for services. Challenges with mental health services remained in 2006. Thirty-two State child welfare directors responding to our survey reported dissatisfaction with the level of mental health services. There is also a housing gap. Youth we spoke with in the four States we visited in 2004 said that locating safe and

stable housing after leaving foster care was one of their primary concerns in their transition to independence.

This service gap was also identified in our 2006 survey when 31 State child welfare directors reported dissatisfaction with the level of housing for foster care youth transitioning to independence. Under the Chafee program, many States began offering new services to support youth who had emancipated from foster care, including education and training vouchers for postsecondary education and Medicaid health insurance. In July 2007, Congressional Research Service (CRS) data showed that 26 States did not spend all of their fiscal year 2004 ETV funding with one State returning almost all of its funds and 14 other States returning over 20 percent of their funding allotment. Overall, more than 14 percent of fiscal year 2004 ETV funding was returned to the U.S. Treasury. In 2007, the American Public Human Services Association reported that 22 States planned or have already started using the Chafee option to offer Medicaid coverage to youth who age out of foster care. The study also found the remaining 28 States and the District of Columbia were reported to be using other methods, such as the State children's health insurance program or the Medicaid waiver demonstration program to extend coverage to youth.

Usage of existing Federal social service programs outside the child welfare system could help reduce the gap in available services for youth aging out of foster care. While in our 2004 survey 49 States reported increased coordination with Federal as well as State and local programs that can provide or supplement independent living services, barriers hindered access to services across programs. In our 2006 survey, States revealed that they were least likely to address challenges in providing services such as those pertaining to mental health, services that are typically provided outside of the child welfare system. Access barriers include the lack of information on the array of programs available in each State or local area, and differences in program priorities. In the November 2004 report and May 2007 testimony before this Subcommittee, we recommended that HHS make information available to States and local areas about other Federal programs that may assist youth in their transition to self sufficiency. HHS continues to disagree with our recommendation.

Services provided to youth aging out of the foster care system must be effective in preparing these youth for self sufficiency. However, how well the Chafee program has worked to improve outcomes for emancipated youth is still unknown 8 years after passage of the Foster Care Independence Act, and HHS has not yet implemented its information system that is intended to meet the Act's requirements for monitoring State performance.

Further, while regional staff conduct much of the Federal oversight of the Chafee program, their current oversight tools do not provide standard information needed to measure performance.

Our 2004 report includes a recommendation that HHS develop a standard reporting format for State plans and progress reports and implement a uniform process regional offices can use to assess States' progress in meeting the needs of youth in foster care and those recently emancipated from care. These recommendations have not been implemented.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Ashby follows:]

United States Government Accountability Office

GAO

Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support, Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives

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CHILD WELFARE

HHS Actions Would Help States Prepare Youth in the Foster Care System for Independent Living

Statement of Cornelia M. Ashby, Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

GAO-07-1097T

GAO

Highlights

Highlights of GAO-07-1097T, a testimony before the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

July 12, 2007

CHILD WELFARE

HHS Actions Would Help States Prepare Youth in the Foster Care System for Independent Living

Why GAO Did This Study

Congress passed the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (FCIA), which doubled annual federal funds for independent living programs to $140 million. This testimony discusses (1) states' FCIA funding allocations, (2) services provided and remaining challenges, (3) state coordination of programs to deliver services, and (4) the states and the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) progress toward meeting program accountability requirements. This testimony is primarily based on our 2004 report on FCIA (05-25), with updated information from our 2007 testimony on state child welfare challenges (07-850T). To conduct the 2004 work, we surveyed state independent living coordinators, conducted 4 state site visits, and reviewed states' plans and annual reports. Updated information from our 2007 testimony was taken primarily from a 2006 survey of state child welfare directors.

What GAO Recommends

We recommended that HHS improve access to federal program information. HHS did not comment on this recommendation in 2004, but disagreed with a similar recommendation in our 2007 testimony. We also recommended that HHS improve its state monitoring processes. HHS agreed to develop uniform monitoring tools, but disagrees that standard state reports are necessary.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-1097T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cornelia M. Ashby at (202) 512-7215 or ashbyc@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

States' funding allocations for independent living programs effectively ranged from a maximum of approximately $500 to $2,500 for each foster care youth who was eligible for independent living services, according to data available at the time of our 2004 report. Funding varied because of differences in states' eligibility requirements and the funding formula used to allocate funds.

Although our 2004 survey of state independent living coordinators showed that 40 states reported expanding existing independent living services to younger youth and 36 states reported serving youth older than they had previously served, states varied in their ability to engage youth and to provide key services. About one-third of reporting states were serving less than half of their eligible foster care youth population, while an equal percentage of states were serving three-fourths or more. Our 2006 survey of state child welfare directors showed that critical gaps remain in providing services such as mental health and housing for youth transitioning to independence. Mental health barriers included differences in eligibility requirements and level of services between the youth and adult systems, and long waiting lists. Housing barriers included limited affordable housing in costly urban areas, scarce rental housing in rural areas, and problems obtaining a rental lease due to the lack of youth employment and credit history or a co-signer to guarantee payment.

Almost all states that we surveyed in 2004 reported an increase in coordination with some federal, state, and local programs, but linkages with other federal and state youth-serving programs were not always in place to increase services available across local areas. Many programs exist at the federal, state, or local level that can be used to provide or supplement independent living services, and each state reported in our survey using some of these programs to provide services. Despite these coordination efforts, some states may not make full use of the available resources. Inconsistent availability of information on the array of programs that were operating in each state and local area was cited as a challenge in promoting coordination in both our prior and more current work.

States and HHS have taken action to fulfill the accountability provisions of FCIA, but 8 years later, little information is available to assess program outcomes. All states developed multiyear plans for their programs and submitted annual reports, but using these documents to assess state performance was hindered by inconsistencies between the plans and reports, an absence of goals and baseline information to measure progress, and incomplete information on outcomes for the youth serviced. ACF started developing an information system in 2000 to monitor state performance, but final regulations directing states to begin collecting data and tracking outcomes are still pending. ACF is also conducting evaluations of selected independent living programs, but results are not yet available.

July 12, 2007

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the needs of youth who leave the foster care system each year without the support of an adoptive or other permanent home. As you are aware, almost 40 percent of the estimated 513,000 children in foster care are age 13 or older, and over 24,000 youth left the foster care system in 2005 as emancipated youth without a permanent living arrangement. Research studies have shown that many of these young people face serious problems once on their own, including homelessness, a lack of education and stable employment, and difficulties obtaining medical and mental health services. In response to concerns that youth leave foster care poorly prepared to live self-sufficiently, in 1986 Congress created the Independent Living Program, which was further strengthened with the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (FCIA) and creation of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Chafee Program). Under the new program, overall federal funding doubled for independent living programs from $70 million to $140 million.[1] In addition to providing increased funding, FCIA resulted in other significant changes for the independent living program.

My testimony today will focus on four key issues as they relate to the implementation of the Chafee Program:

1. how states' funding allocations for independent living programs compare when considering the number of youth eligible for services,

2. the extent to which states have expanded independent living services and age groups for youth in foster care after the passage of FCIA and what challenges remain,

3. the extent to which states have used other federal and state programs to coordinate the delivery of independent living services to foster care youth, and

[1]The Chafee Program receives funding under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. Title IV-E authorizes the appropriation of federal funds to states for the purpose of developing and operating foster care and transitional independent living programs and providing payments to adoptive parents of eligible foster children with special needs. In 2006, the adoption program received approximately $1.8 billion, and the foster care program received approximately $4.6 billion.

4. how the states and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) have fulfilled the program accountability provisions of the law and assessed the effectiveness of independent living services.

My comments are based on the findings of a report GAO issued in 2004,[2] with updated information from a May 2007 testimony on challenges facing state child welfare systems.[3] The information reported in the 2004 report was based on survey responses from independent living coordinators in all 50 states and the District of Columbia regarding their experiences in developing and implementing their Chafee Programs in federal fiscal year 2003. Where appropriate, we compared those responses to information we gathered on state independent living programs operating in federal fiscal year 1998. We analyzed federal financial and foster care data. We also analyzed Chafee Program plans from 49 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico for 2001-2004, and 90 annual progress and services reports for 2001 and 2002. We visited 4 states—Connecticut, Florida, Texas, and Washington—and two local areas within each state, where we spoke with state and local officials, caseworkers, youth, foster parents, and contract providers. Finally, we interviewed HHS officials, federal contractors, and child welfare experts, and reviewed relevant documents and literature. We included updated information—taken primarily from our 2006 survey of state child welfare directors—from our 2007 testimony on challenges states face in improving outcomes for children. In addition, we included additional information from reports issued by the American Public Human Services Association, the Congressional Research Service, and the National Resource Center for Youth Services. We conducted our work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

In summary,

- States' funding allocations for independent living programs effectively ranged from a maximum of approximately $500 to $2,500 for each foster care youth who was eligible for independent living services, according to data available at the time of our 2004 report. Funding

[2]See GAO, *Foster Youth: HHS Actions Could Improve Coordination of Services and Monitoring of States' Independent Living Programs*, GAO-05-25 (Washington, D.C.: Nov.18, 2004).

[3]See GAO, *Child Welfare: Additional Federal Action Could Help States Address Challenges in Providing Services to Children and Families*, GAO-07-816T (Washington, D.C.: May 10, 2007).

varied because of differences in states' eligibility requirements and the funding formula used to allocate funds.

- Although our 2004 survey of state independent living coordinators showed that 40 states reported expanding existing independent living services to younger youth and 36 states reported serving youth older than they had previously served, states varied in their ability to engage youth and to provide key services. About one-third of reporting states were serving less than half of their eligible foster care youth population, while an equal percentage of states were serving three-fourths or more, and states we visited reported that gaps in the availability of critical services contributed to the differences in proportion of youth served. For example, securing safe and secure housing was identified as a challenge by youth and program officials in the 4 states we visited, including limited affordable housing in costly urban areas and scarce rental housing in rural areas. In addition, our more recent survey of state child welfare directors in 2006 showed that 31 states remained dissatisfied with housing for youth transitioning to independence, and similar numbers of states were dissatisfied with the availability of mental health, substance abuse, and dental health services.

- Almost all states that we surveyed in 2004 reported an increase in coordination with some federal, state, and local programs, but linkages with other federal and state youth-serving programs were not always in place to increase services available across local areas. Many programs exist at the federal, state, or local level that can be used to provide or supplement independent living services, and each state reported in our survey using some of these programs to provide services. Despite these coordination efforts, some states may not make full use of the available resources. Inconsistent availability of information on the array of programs that were operating in each state and local area was cited as a challenge in promoting coordination in both our prior and more current work.

- States and HHS have taken action to fulfill the accountability provisions of FCIA, but little information is available to assess the effectiveness of independent living services. At the time of our review in 2004, all states had developed their initial multiyear plans for their programs and submitted annual reports to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), but using these plans and the reports to assess state performance was hindered by inconsistencies between the plans and reports, an absence of goals and baseline information to use in measuring progress, and incomplete information on outcomes for all

youth who received services. Although in 2000 ACF began taking steps to develop an information system that will allow it to capture data on the characteristics, services, and outcomes of youth in independent living programs, it has not yet implemented the final regulations directing states to begin collecting data and tracking outcomes. ACF is also conducting an evaluation of selected independent living programs.

In our 2004 report, we recommended that the Secretary of HHS improve the availability of information on the array of federal programs that could be used to assist youth transitioning out of foster care. HHS did not comment on this recommendation. Our 2007 testimony cites a similar recommendation that HHS take action to improve awareness of and access to federal social services by such means as modifying the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance. HHS disagreed with this recommendation, stating that it was insufficient to address the problem and incorrectly implied that caseworkers were not already aware of existing resources. We continue to support the recommendation based on the results of our work.

Our 2004 report also recommended that HHS improve existing processes for monitoring states' progress in meeting the needs of current and former foster care youth by developing a standard reporting format for state plans and progress reports, and implementing a uniform process regional offices can use to assess states' progress in meeting the needs of youth in foster care and those recently emancipated from care. HHS continues to disagree with our recommendation to provide a standard reporting format in that it would be overly prescriptive and impose an unnecessary burden on states. In addition, HHS reported that when standard data are available through the National Youth in Transition Database, the agency would be better positioned to determine how best to assess state performance. In the continued absence of implementation of such a database, we continue to support our recommendation to monitor state performance through modification of existing state reporting requirements. HHS agreed with our recommendation to implement a uniform process that regional offices can use to assess states' progress, but has not yet done so.

Background

In 1986, Congress amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to authorize federal funds targeted to assist youth aged 16 and over in making the transition from foster care to living independent of the child welfare system and created the Independent Living Program. This program was designed to prepare adolescents in foster care to live self-sufficiently once they exited the child welfare system. Several amendments were made to

the Independent Living Program over the years, but the passage of FCIA and the creation of the Chafee Program represented the most significant changes in the federal Independent Living Program since its creation. FCIA doubled the federal funds available for independent living programs to $140 million each year.[1] These funds are allocated to states based on their share of the nation's foster care population.[2]

In addition to providing increased funding, FCIA eliminated the minimum age limit of 16 years and provided states with the flexibility to define the age at which children in foster care are eligible for services to help them prepare for independent living, as long as services are provided to youth who are likely to remain in foster care until 18 years of age.

The law also provided several new services to help youth make the transition to adulthood.

- It allowed states to use up to 30 percent of their state allotment for room and board for former foster care youth up to age 21.
- It allowed states the option to expand Medicaid coverage to former foster care adolescents between 18 and 21.
- Title IV-E was amended again in 2002 to provide foster care youth vouchers for postsecondary education and training under the Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) program and authorized an additional $60 million for states to provide postsecondary education and training vouchers up to $5,000 per year per youth. Eligible participants include youth otherwise eligible for services under the states' Chafee Programs, youth adopted from foster care after attaining the age of 16, and youth participating in the voucher program on their 21st birthday (until they turn 23 years old) as long as they are enrolled in a postsecondary education or training program and are making satisfactory progress toward completion of that program.

[1]The actual amount divided among the states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico totaled $137.9 million. Under the law, 1.5 percent of the $140 million is reserved for evaluation, technical assistance, performance measurement, and data collection activities conducted by HHS. States must provide matching contributions of 20 percent to receive Chafee Program funds. The matching contribution may be in cash or in-kind contributions of services, equipment, or property.

[2]A hold-harmless clause in FCIA ensures that states with smaller populations received either $500,000 or the amount of independent living funds they received in federal fiscal year 1998, whichever amount is greater.

In addition, the law required that states make every effort to coordinate their Chafee Programs with other federal and state programs for youth, such as the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program, abstinence education programs, local housing programs, programs for disabled youth, and school-to-work programs offered by high schools or local workforce agencies. Further, states were required to coordinate their programs with each Indian tribe in the state and offer the state's independent living services to Indian children.

To receive funds under the Chafee Program, states were required to develop multiyear plans describing how they would design and deliver programs and to submit program certifications. The multiyear Chafee plans must include a description of the state's program design, including its goals, strategies, and its implementation plan for achieving the purposes of the law. States were also required to certify that they would operate a statewide independent living program that complied with the specific aspects of the law, such as providing training to foster parents, adoptive parents, workers in group homes, and case managers on issues confronting adolescents preparing for independent living. Further, to receive annual funds, ACF required states to submit annual reports that described the services provided and activities conducted under their Chafee Programs, including information on any program modifications and their current status of implementation; provide a record of how funds were expended; and include a description of the extent to which the funds assisted youth age 18 to 21 in making the transition to self-sufficiency.

FCIA also required that HHS develop and implement a plan to collect information needed to effectively monitor and measure a state's performance, including the characteristics of youth served by independent living programs, the services delivered, and the outcomes achieved. Further, FCIA required HHS to conduct evaluations of independent living programs deemed to be innovative or of potential national significance using rigorous scientific standards to the maximum extent practicable, such as random assignment to treatment and control groups.

FCIA Increased Independent Living Allocations for Most States and Allocations per Youth Vary by State

While overall federal funding for state independent living programs doubled with the passage of FCIA, there were significant variations in the changes to state allocations, and the maximum amount of funds available at the time of our 2004 report for each eligible foster care youth ranged between $476 and $2,300. Under the previous independent living program, states received funds ranging from $13,000 in Alaska to more than $12 million in California. In the first year of funding under FCIA, Alaska and 8 other states received the guaranteed minimum of $500,000, while California received more than $27 million (see table 1). Some states were unable to spend all of their federal allocations in the first 2 years of increased funding under the program. For example, in 2001, 20 states returned nearly $10 million in federal funding to HHS, and in 2002, 13 states returned more than $4 million. ACF regional officials reported that one reason for these unspent funds was that some states did not initially have the infrastructure in place to quickly absorb the influx of funds. Data provided in a July 2007 Congressional Research Service memo to Congress showed that 9 states returned less than 1 percent of total Chafee funding in 2004 (see app. I).

Table 1: Changes in Funding Allocations across States since the Passage of FCIA

State	1998 allocation	2001 allocation	Percentage change over 1998 allocation
District of Columbia	$1,091,992	$1,091,992	0
Louisiana	1,358,131	1,358,131	0
New Jersey	2,297,848	2,297,848	0
New York	11,585,958	12,313,109	6
Pennsylvania	4,639,225	5,304,231	14
Alabama	1,038,490	1,288,304	24
Virginia	1,361,561	1,698,102	25
Maine	565,888	737,309	30
West Virginia	521,302	740,816	42
Mississippi	514,444	747,127	45
Wisconsin	1,554,305	2,252,837	45
Michigan	4,171,796	6,109,567	46
New Hampshire	320,326	500,000	56
Ohio	2,860,992	4,693,625	64
Kentucky	791,557	1,332,019	68
Vermont	295,633	500,000	69
Minnesota	1,142,066	2,102,991	84
Oregon	930,799	1,723,115	85
South Carolina	579,606	1,085,860	87
Rhode Island	314,840	612,710	95
Indiana	1,019,970	2,088,263	105
Montana	244,190	504,007	106
Connecticut	754,518	1,567,882	108
Colorado	825,854	1,785,766	116
California	12,481,777	27,570,679	121
Kansas	717,477	1,583,555	121
Missouri	1,295,026	2,940,120	127
New Mexico	207,149	500,000	141
Delaware	203,034	500,000	146
Washington	825,168	2,030,990	146
Texas	1,841,708	4,600,585	150
Arkansas	270,940	682,373	152
Iowa	449,966	1,134,717	152
Maryland	1,238,095	3,143,032	154

State	1998 allocation	2001 allocation	Percentage change over 1998 allocation
North Carolina	1,045,349	2,650,713	154
Georgia	1,088,652	2,803,131	156
South Dakota	193,430	500,000	158
North Dakota	192,058	500,000	160
Utah	202,348	531,358	163
Nebraska	435,562	1,293,213	197
Oklahoma	620,076	1,910,596	208
Tennessee	777,838	2,523,776	224
Illinois	2,817,094	9,413,899	234
Nevada	153,647	517,800	237
Massachusetts	635,852	2,610,972	311
Idaho	107,004	500,000	367
Arizona	347,763	1,677,996	383
Florida	987,045	8,016,425	712
Wyoming	44,585	500,000	1,021
Hawaii	17,834	514,994	2,788
Alaska	13,032	500,000	3,737

Source: GAO analysis of HHS data.

Notes: As required by FCIA, no state received less than its federal fiscal year 1998 allotment under the Title IV-E Independent Living Program. Federal fiscal year 2001 was the first year states received full funding under FCIA.

Allocations do not account for unobligated or unliquidated funds.

Puerto Rico is not included in this analysis because the territory did not receive independent living funds in 1998. The 2001 allocation to Puerto Rico totaled $1,814,852.

At the time of our 2004 report, we could not determine the exact amount of funding states had available to spend on each youth eligible for independent living services because of the lack of data on eligible youth emancipated from foster care. However, available data at that time on youth in foster care suggest that states may have different amounts of funds available for services to youth in foster care. We compared each state's 2004 FCIA allocation with its 2002 population of eligible youth in

foster care.[6] This comparison showed that maximum funding for independent living services ranged from $476 per foster care youth in West Virginia to almost $2,300 per foster care youth in Montana.[7] These differences were due in part to the new provision that allowed states to define the age ranges within which youth were eligible for independent living services. For example, 4 states reported in our survey offering independent living services to youth at age 12, while 27 states reported offering services at age 14.[8] In addition, the funding formula is based on the total number of all children in foster care. However, some states have a larger share of youth eligible for independent living services than other states, even when their eligibility age range is the same. For example, of the 15 states reporting in our survey that youth are eligible for services between the ages of 14 and 21, 3 states had 25 percent or less of their foster care population within this age range, while in 3 other states, this age range accounted for over 40 percent of the total foster care population.[9]

[6]We calculated this figure using financial data from HHS on the FCIA funding allocations in federal fiscal year 2004 and Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data from federal fiscal year 2002 because funding allocations are calculated using foster care population data from AFCARS 2 years prior to the funding year. These calculations also included states' 20 percent match requirement. However, states may use other funds to pay for services, and these calculations do not reflect any additional funding. To determine the eligible population for each state, we used the age ranges that states reported in our 2004 survey and AFCARS data on the numbers of youth in each age group. For example, Alabama reported in our survey serving youth between 14 and 21 with independent living services. According to data the state reported to AFCARS, 2,881 youth in this age range were in care in Alabama in federal fiscal year 2002. However, this calculation excludes youth emancipated from foster care, since AFCARS does not capture this information.

[7]Nationwide, the average funding for independent living services available per eligible youth in foster care was about $1,090 in federal fiscal year 2004.

[8]According to results from our 2004 survey, 4 states began services at age 12, 7 states began services at age 13, 27 states began services at age 14, 9 states begin services at age 15, and 4 states began services at age 16.

[9]These calculations are based on AFCARS data, which do not include emancipated youth.

States Expanded and Improved Services for Youth after FCIA, but Reported That Gaps in Critical Services Remain

In our 2004 survey, 40 states reported expanding services to youth younger than they had previously served, and 36 states reported serving older youth, but states reported service gaps in critical areas, such as mental health and housing. The number of states that reported providing core independent living services, such as independent living skills assessments, daily living skills training, and counseling to youth younger than 16 more than doubled after FCIA. Similarly, more states reported offering these supports and services to youth who were emancipated from foster care.

Many states also began to offer the new services to support youth that emancipated from foster care. These services include the Education and Training Vouchers, Medicaid health insurance, and assistance with room and board.

- *ETV*: All states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico began receiving funds under the ETV program to assist youth seeking postsecondary education, but 26 states did not spend all of the funding received (see app. II). A report from the National Resource Center for Youth Development showed that states provide a range of benefits to youth eligible for ETVs.[10] Over 90 percent of 38 state independent living coordinators responding to a survey reported offering financial support to youth for room and board, school supplies, equipment and uniforms, school-related fees, and transportation costs. Eighty-four percent of states made payments for child care for the dependents of youth, and 60 percent of state reported making payments for college or university health plans on behalf of youth.[11] States were challenged to spend all of their funding allotment. Mississippi returned almost all of its 2004 ETV funds, and 14 other states returned over 20 percent of their funding allotment.[12]

- *Medicaid*: Recent information from the American Public Human Services Association shows that all states are now using or planning to

[10]See Michelle L. Kessler, *Educating Youth in Care: The First Year of Education and Training Vouchers* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: 2004).

[11]Of the 38 responding states, 54 percent also indicated that they pay for other tangible benefits such as tutoring, Internet access, computers, books, medications required to allow youth to be successful with their studies, payment for housing over the holidays and vacations when dorms are closed, preparatory tests, and study materials.

[12]Overall, more than 14 percent of 2004 ETV funding was returned to the U.S. Treasury. As states have 2 years to spend these funds, information on later years is not currently available.

use the Chafee option or other means to extend Medicaid coverage to youth. In our 2004 survey, 31 of 50 state independent living coordinators had reported offering Medicaid benefits to at least some emancipated youth to help them maintain access to health care benefits while they transitioned to independence. In 2007, the American Public Human Services Association reported that 22 states planned or have already started using the Chafee option to offer Medicaid coverage to youth who age out of foster care.[11] The study also found that the remaining 28 states and the District of Columbia were reported to be using other methods, such as the State Children's Health Insurance Program or the Medicaid waiver demonstration program, to extend coverage to youth.

- *Housing assistance:* In our 2004 survey, 46 states reported that they offered assistance with room and board to youth who had been emancipated from foster care, and the 4 states we visited reported offering a range of housing supports to assist youth. At the time of our visit, Connecticut provided several housing options to meet the needs of youth at varying levels of independence, including group homes, supervised apartment sites, and unsupervised apartment sites with periodic visits from case managers. While 3 other states we visited offered a more limited supply of housing options, all provided some type of housing subsidy or placement.

- *Existing services:* Chafee Program funds were also used to improve the quality of existing independent living services and refocus the attention of their programs, according to state officials we visited. For example, local officials in Florida said that prior to FCIA, training in daily living skills was provided haphazardly, and in many cases unqualified staff taught classes even though such training was considered a core component of their independent living program. At the time of our visit, Florida officials said that the state redesigned staff training, improved instructor quality, and was better prepared to provide youth with the skills necessary to live independently outside of the foster care system.

[11]Arizona, California, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming reported enacting the Chafee Medicaid option. Maryland, Missouri, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Wisconsin reported planning to pursue the use of the Chafee Medicaid option. See American Public Human Services Association, *Medicaid Access for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care* (Washington, D.C.: 2007).

States differed in the proportion of eligible youth served under their respective independent living programs. In our 2004 survey, 40 states reported serving about 56,000 youth—or approximately 44 percent of youth in foster care who were eligible for independent living services in these states.[14] About one-third of reporting states were serving less than half of their eligible foster care youth population, while an equal percentage of states were serving three-fourths or more. While states expanded eligibility to younger youth, most services continued to be directed at youth age 16 and older in most of the states we visited.

Certain gaps in the availability of critical services were reported, which may have contributed to the challenge of serving higher numbers of eligible youth.[15] States also reported that these challenges were more prominent in rural areas. Service gaps included the following:

- *Mental health services:* Youth in foster care often require mental health services continuing beyond emancipation. However, states continue to be challenged in providing youth with a smooth transition between the youth and adult mental health systems. Of the 4 states we visited in 2004, 3 cited difficulties due to more stringent eligibility requirements in the adult system, different levels of services, and long waiting lists for services. Challenges with mental health services remained in 2006, when 32 state child welfare directors responding to our survey reported dissatisfaction with the level of mental health services.[16]

- *Mentoring services:* Research studies indicate that the presence of positive adult role models is critical for youth in foster care because family separations and placement disruptions have been found to hinder the development of enduring bonds. Although the majority of states reported in our 2004 survey that they offered mentoring programs to youth, officials in the states we visited cited challenges in providing all youth with access to mentoring programs to establish and

[14]We were unable to identify comparable data on the proportion of eligible youth in foster care that received independent living services prior to the passage of FCIA.

[15]State and local administrators reported some similar gaps in our 1999 report. They noted that their independent living programs fell short in key areas, including gaps in employment, daily living skills, and housing services. See GAO, *Foster Care: Effectiveness of Independent Living Services Unknown*, HEHS-00-13 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 5, 1999).

[16]Child welfare directors in many states were also dissatisfied with the level of substance abuse services (31) and dental care services (29). Dissatisfaction with physical health services and access to Medicaid was cited by 10 states.

maintain such relationships.[17] For example, in Connecticut, one program director reported challenges recruiting adults to serve as mentors, especially men willing to make a 1-year commitment to an adolescent boy. In addition, some state and local officials and service providers seemed unclear on what should be included in a high-quality mentoring program and how to identify qualified service providers.

- *Securing safe and suitable housing:* Providing appropriate housing also remains a critical service gap. Youth we spoke with across the 4 states we visited in 2004 said that locating safe and stable housing after leaving foster care was one of their primary concerns in their transition to independence, and state officials reported challenges meeting youths' housing needs. Youth reported difficulties renting housing because of a lack of an employment history, a credit history, or a cosigner. State and local officials in the states we visited said the availability of housing resources for foster youth during their initial transition from foster care depended on where they lived, and in some cases the benefits provided did not completely meet the needs of youth, or were available only to certain youth. For example, at the time of our visit, local officials in Washington reported that housing subsidies may not completely offset expenses for youth in expensive urban areas, like Seattle, and that rental housing in some rural areas was scarce. This service gap was identified by states again in our 2006 survey, as 31 state child welfare directors reported dissatisfaction with the level of housing for foster youth transitioning to independence.

- *Youth and foster family engagement:* State and local officials, as well as service providers in the 4 states we visited said that it was difficult to get some youth to participate in the independent living programs and that foster parents were sometimes reluctant partners. While youth were generally offered incentives, such as cash stipends, to participate in daily living skills training or other activities, officials emphasized that participation is voluntary and it is critical for foster parents to support and encourage youth participation in the program.[18]

[17]Forty-five states reported having mentoring services for youth in foster care, and 39 states reported having mentoring services for emancipated youth.

[18]The National Resource Center for Youth Services—under contract with HHS—reported in 2004 on a study conducted by the Casey Family Services, which found that not all young adults accepted supports extended to them. In a sample of 115 alumni of foster care, only 41 percent incurred expenses for services after age 18. Some youth are simply ready to end their relationship with the child welfare system when they are legally able. Others, however, may not incur expenses for services because they are not aware of the benefits that are available. See Kessler, *Educating Youth in Care*.

States Reported Increased Coordination with Federal and State Programs to Provide Independent Living Services to Youth, but Barriers Hinder Linkages across Programs

After FCIA, 49 states reported increased coordination with a number of federal, state, and local programs that can provide or supplement independent living services, but officials from the 4 states we visited reported several barriers in developing the linkages necessary to access services under these programs across local areas. States we surveyed reported working with a range of service provides, such as Job Corps, workforce boards, and local housing agencies.[10]

States we visited used different strategies to develop linkages among state youth programs. Three of the states we visited reported establishing state-level work groups that included representatives from the independent living program and other state agencies to bring agency officials together to discuss the needs of youth in foster care and possible strategies for improving service delivery. For example, Florida's legislature mandated a state-level work group to facilitate information sharing at the state level among various agencies, such as the State Departments of Children and Families and Education, the Agency for Workforce Innovation, and the Agency for Health Care Administration. Additional strategies states developed to establish linkages with other federal, state, or local programs included establishing liaisons between agencies or programs or through less formal collaborative arrangements. Officials also reported developing linkages with other private resources in their communities, such as business owners, to provide services to youth in the independent living program.

Despite states' efforts, we continued to find in our 2006 survey that states were least likely to address challenges in providing services such as mental health that are typically provided outside of the child welfare system by other agencies. Officials in the 4 states we visited in 2004 reported several barriers that hinder their ability to establish linkages with other agencies and programs, including the lack of information on the array of programs available in each state or local area and differences in program priorities. Officials from 3 states said that they relied on local officials to identify potential partners and initiate and maintain coordination efforts, and while individuals in some local areas may have

[10] Job Corps is an education and vocational training program administered by the U.S. Department of Labor to service youth ages 16 through 24 years. The Workforce Investment Act established workforce investment boards. Each state workforce investment board is responsible for developing statewide workforce policies and overseeing its local workforce investment boards. The local workforce investment boards, in turn, are responsible for developing local workforce policies and overseeing operations.

developed successful collaborations with service providers in their area, these relationships have not always been expanded statewide. To some extent, this has been due to the fact that state and local child welfare officials differ in their awareness of resources available from other agencies. Some gaps in awareness may be partly due to turnover rates for caseworkers reported by the states we visited.[20] Caseworkers' lack of knowledge about available programs may have contributed to foster parents and youth reporting that they were unaware of the array of services available from other federal, state, or local programs. In addition, officials cited barriers to establishing linkages with other federal and state programs because of different program priorities. Differences in performance goals among programs can affect the ability of independent living staff to obtain services for foster youth from other agencies. In North Carolina, state officials we visited in 2006 said that about 70 percent of children and families in the child welfare system received services from multiple public agencies, and the Catalog of Domestic Assistance (CFDA)—a repository of information on all federal assistance programs—lists over 300 federal programs that provide youth and family services. In October 2003, the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth recommended that the CFDA be modified to provide a search feature that can be used to identify locations where federally funded programs were operating.[21]

[20]See also GAO, *Child Welfare: HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff*, GAO-03-357 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 31, 2003).

[21]A similar model may be found on an HHS Web link, http://ask.hrsa.gov/pc/, where users can enter a ZIP code to find the closest community health center locations offering medical, mental, dental, and other health services on a sliding fee scale.

States' and HHS's Actions in Response to FCIA Requirements Have Not Yet Established Accountability for Independent Living Programs

All states developed multiyear plans as required under FCIA and submitted annual progress reports to ACF for their independent living programs, but the absence of standard comprehensive information within and across state plans and reports precludes using them at the state and federal levels to monitor how well the programs are working to serve foster care youth. HHS has not yet implemented its plan to collect information to measure states' program performance, and while some states reported collecting some data, states have experienced difficulties in contacting youth to determine their outcomes. HHS has begun to evaluate selected independent living programs.

- *State plans and annual reports:* All states developed state plans as required by FCIA that described independent living services they planned to provide to foster care youth and submitted annual reports to ACF, but for several reasons, these plans and reports cannot be used to assess states' independent living programs. While ACF officials stated that the plans and annual reports served as the primary method the agency used to monitor states' use of the Chafee Program funds, ACF did not require states to use a uniform reporting format, set specific baselines for measuring progress, or report on youths' outcomes. As a result, each state developed plans and reports that varied in their scope and level of detail, making it difficult to determine whether states had made progress in preparing foster youth to live self-sufficiently.[21]

  On the basis of our review of plans from all 50 states and the District of Columbia covering federal fiscal years 2001 through 2004, and annual reports for 45 states from federal fiscal years 2001 and 2002, we found the following:

  - Few states both organized the information in their plans to address the purposes of FCIA and presented specific strategies they would use to meet these purposes.
  - The plans vary in their usefulness in establishing outcomes the states intended to achieve for youth.
  - Annual reports for all 45 states contained information that did not directly relate to information in their state plan, making it unclear

[21]We previously reported similar problems using state reports for federal monitoring of independent living programs prior to FCIA and had recommended that HHS establish a uniform set of data elements and a standard reporting format for state reporting on independent living programs. See GAO-HEHS-00-23.

whether the differences were due to service changes or missing information.

- Of the 90 annual progress reports we reviewed, 52 reports did not include clear data that could be used to determine progress toward meeting the goals of the states' independent living programs.

ACF officials said that they recognize the limitations of these documents as tools to monitor states' use of independent living program funds, but explained that they rely on states' to self-certify that their independent living programs adhere to FCIA requirements. Staff in ACF's 10 regional offices conduct direct oversight of the program by reviewing the plans and reports, interpreting guidance, and communicating with the states. However, officials in three offices reported during our 2004 review that their review of the documents was cursory and that the plans and annual reports do not serve as effective monitoring tools. In addition, ACF officials reported that the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) used to evaluate the states' overall child welfare systems could serve as a tool to monitor independent living programs, but the CFSR is limited in the type and amount of data collected on youth receiving independent living services.

- *National Youth in Transition Database*: ACF has not completed efforts to develop a plan to collect data on youths' characteristics, services, and outcomes in response to the FCIA requirement, and some states that are attempting to collect information on youths' outcomes are experiencing difficulties. In 2000, ACF started to develop the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) to collect information needed to effectively monitor and measure states' performance in operating independent living programs. The agency issued proposed rules on July 14, 2006, but as of July 2007, final rules governing the system have not been issued.[77]

  The proposed rules include an approach to collect information on all youth who received independent living services, youth who are in foster care at age 17, and follow-up information on youth at ages 19 and 21. For any youth who receives independent living services from either the child welfare agency or another source supported by federal Chafee funds, the state must report a series of data elements, including the

[77]Chafee National Youth in Transition Database, 71 Fed. Reg. 40,346 (July 14, 2006) (to be codified at 45 C.F.R. pt. 1356).

type of independent living services received, such as housing education or health education and risk prevention. These data are to be collected on an ongoing basis for as long as the youth receives services.

In order to develop a system to identify youth outcomes, HHS proposes establishing information on a baseline population of youth at age 17. All youth who turn 17 years old while in foster care would be surveyed on a series of outcomes, such as their current employment status. States would be required to conduct follow-up surveys with the youth at ages 19 and 21. HHS would allow the states to pull a sample from this baseline population with which to conduct these follow-up surveys. For example, California had over 7,500 youth in care in 2004 who were 17 years old. On the basis of the proposed sampling methodology, the state would be allowed to survey a minimum of 341 19-year-olds in the follow-up effort.

According to results from our survey, in federal fiscal year 2003, 30 states attempted to contact youth who had been emancipated from foster care for initial information to determine their status, including education and employment outcomes. Of those states, most reported that they were unsuccessful in contacting more than half of the youth. Further, 21 states reported attempting to follow up with emancipated youth after a longer period of time had elapsed but had trouble reaching all the youth. Similarly, officials in the states we visited reported that collecting outcome data is especially challenging since there is little they can do to find youth unless the youth themselves initiate the contact. Further, some officials were concerned about the value of the outcome data since they believe that youth who are doing well are more likely to participate in the follow-up interviews, thus skewing the results. When HHS issued the proposed rule, it provided strategies states could use to conduct the follow-up component of the NYTD requirements. For example, the document recommends letting the youth know up-front that the agency will be contacting them in the future; suggests keeping a "case file" that tracks any activity, such as reasons why a letter was returned; and suggests that the agency establish a toll-free phone line.

- *Multistate evaluations:* At the time of our 2004 review, ACF expected to complete the evaluations of four approaches to delivering independent living services by December 2007. However, it is unclear if that deadline will be achieved at this point. As required by FCIA, these evaluations are expected to use rigorous scientific standards, such as an experimental research design that randomly assigns youth in

independent living programs to different groups: one that is administered the experimental treatment and one that is not. HHS initiated this effort in 2001 with a nationwide review of potentially promising approaches to delivering independent living services. HHS contracted with a research institute to conduct a nationwide search to identify independent living programs that meet the criteria of the evaluation[70] and to conduct 5-year evaluations of the selected programs.[71] On the basis of the search and the established criteria, HHS selected four programs for the evaluation (see table 2).

[70]In the nationwide search, HHS contractors sought programs that met four criteria for a rigorous research study: Programs should be directed, at least in part, at youth leaving foster care or expected to remain in foster care until adulthood; be innovative, of national significance, and capable of expanding into new geographic areas; be willing and capable of participating in experiments involving random assignment of youth to treatment services or the alternative services; and have an adequate sample size and should have a need for the services greater than what is currently available so an experiment would not reduce the total number of youth serviced by the program. Many programs could not support a randomized study because their youth population was not large enough to ensure youth did not go without services.

[71]HHS contracted with the Urban Institute and its partners—the Chapin Hall Center for Children and the National Opinion Research Center.

Table 2: Programs Included in the Multisite Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs

Site	Program	Type of service	Age of focus	Number of youth (control and experimental)	Length of service provision	Key outcome of interest
Los Angeles County, California	Community College Life Skills (LST) Training	Classroom-based and experiential life skills training, teen support group, and exposure to community college opportunities	17	450	5 weeks (10 workshops)	Education, employment, housing stability, avoidance of risk behaviors
Los Angeles County, California	Early Start to Emancipation Preparation (ESTEP)	Structured tutoring and mentoring curriculum for youth 1-3 years behind grade level in reading and math skills	14-15	450	6 months of tutoring on average, mentoring continues less intensively after tutoring ends, for 3 months on average	Education, employment, and interpersonal and relationship skills
Kern County, California	Employment program	Employment skills training, job referral, and employment support provided through county Temporary Assistance to Needy Families agency	16	250	Ongoing through age 21	Employment and economic self-sufficiency
Massachusetts	Adolescent Outreach Program	Intensive, individualized life skills mentoring and casework	17	250	Mean of 1 year	Employment, housing stability, service linkages

Source: HHS.

In the report issued in 2004, we made recommendations to HHS (1) to make information available to states and local areas about other federal programs that may assist youth in their transition to self-sufficiency and provide guidance on how to access services under these programs and (2) to develop a standard reporting format for state plans and progress reports and implement a uniform process regional offices can use to assess states' progress in meeting the needs of youth in foster care and those recently emancipated from care. These recommendations have not been implemented.

Concluding Observations

Preparing youth to successfully transition to independence is a daunting task that requires coordinated and continuous services across many social service systems including child welfare, health, education, and housing. The Chafee Program has provided a single funding stream that can be used to meet service needs across these social systems. However, this funding alone is not sufficient to overcome state challenges in meeting the varied service needs of emancipating youth. The child welfare system must work with housing agencies to remove barriers faced by youth with no employment history or cosigner, and with health agencies, to ensure a smooth transition between the youth and adult mental health systems. In addition, states continue to have difficulty building adequate service capacity for housing and mental health in all locales, and child welfare staff still struggle to identify the myriad of public and private sector programs that exist to assist youth. Our November 2004 report and our May 2007 testimony present recommendations we made to HHS to make information available to states and local areas about other federal programs that may assist youth in their transition to self-sufficiency.

HHS did not comment on our 2004 recommendation, but disagreed with our recent recommendation to improve awareness of and access to various social services funded by the federal government. HHS stated that the recommendation was insufficient to address the need for additional services, and incorrectly implied that local child welfare agencies were not already aware of and using such resources. We acknowledged that increasing awareness of existing federal resources is not the only action needed, but in the course of our work across the years, continue to find that caseworkers are sometimes unaware of the full array of federal resources, such as health and housing, available in their locale, or had not coordinated with other agencies to use them. We continue to support the view that federal action, such as modifying the CFDA, would allow caseworkers and others to more easily identify services and service providers funded by federal agencies in closest proximity to the youth and families they serve.

How well the Chafee Program has worked to improve outcomes for emancipated youth among states is still unknown 8 years after the passage of FCIA, and HHS has not yet implemented its information system that is intended to meet FCIA requirements for collecting and monitoring a state's performance. Given the significant variation in the number of youth served and services provided across states, an interim system for measuring state progress would seem to be warranted. However, while HHS has an oversight process to measure outcomes of state child welfare systems as a whole, this process no longer includes measures required by FCIA.

Similarly, while ACF's regional offices conduct much of the federal oversight for the Chafee Program, the oversight tools currently in place do not provide standard information needed to measure and compare performance across states. Our 2004 report included a recommendation to develop a standard reporting format for state plans and progress reports and implement a uniform process regional offices can use to assess states' progress in meeting the needs of youth in foster care and those recently emancipated from care. These recommendations have not been implemented.

HHS continues to disagree with our recommendation to develop a standard reporting format for state plans and progress reports, stating that such action would be overly prescriptive and impose an unnecessary burden on states. However, as reflected in our 2004 report, we continue to believe that strengthening the state reporting process is needed to provide some assurance of program accountability at the state and federal levels. HHS had agreed with our recommendation to establish a uniform process regional offices can use to assess states' progress and said that in 2005, ACF would develop and provide a review protocol to be used in regional office desk reviews of states' annual progress reports. However, ACF officials reported that they have not yet implemented such a review protocol.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I will be pleased to respond to any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

For further information, please contact Cornelia Ashby or Kay Brown at (202) 512-7215. Individuals making key contributions to this testimony include Lacinda Ayers and Sara L. Schibanoff.

Appendix I: Fiscal Year 2004 Chafee Foster Care Independence Program: Final Funds Allotted, Expended, and Returned to Federal Treasury, by State

State	Dollar amount allocated	Dollar amount expended	Dollar amount returned to the U.S. Treasury	Percentage of allotment returned to the U.S. Treasury
Alabama	$1,536,181	$1,536,181	$0	0%
Alaska	550,782	550,782	0	0
Arizona	1,606,959	1,606,959	0	0
Arkansas	764,776	764,776	0	0
California	26,112,429	26,112,429	0	0
Colorado	2,184,770	2,184,770	0	0
Connecticut	1,519,750	1,519,750	0	0
Delaware	500,000	500,000	0	0
District of Columbia	1,092,276	1,092,276	0	0
Florida	8,265,302	8,265,302	0	0
Georgia	3,120,798	3,120,798	0	0
Hawaii	703,523	703,523	0	0
Idaho	500,000	500,000	0	0
Illinois	6,316,656	6,316,656	0	0
Indiana	2,184,711	1,987,583	197,128	9.0
Iowa	1,336,412	1,336,412	0	0
Kansas	1,549,330	1,549,330	0	0
Kentucky	1,741,339	1,741,339	0	0
Louisiana	1,358,484	1,358,484	0	0
Maine	771,350	771,350	0	0
Maryland	3,048,143	2,635,510	412,633	13.5
Massachusetts	3,242,220	2,859,297	62,360	1.9
Michigan	5,235,404	5,235,404	0	0
Minnesota	2,063,393	2,063,393	0	0
Mississippi	758,148	758,148	0	0
Missouri	3,303,069	3,303,069	0	0
Montana	500,000	500,000	0	0
Nebraska	1,586,304	1,586,304	0	0
Nevada	500,000	498,650	1,350	0.3
New Hampshire	500,000	500,000	0	0
New Jersey	2,844,433	2,844,433	0	0
New Mexico	500,000	500,000	0	0
New York	11,588,972	11,588,972	0	0
North Carolina	2,405,731	2,249,851	155,880	6.5

State	Dollar amount allocated	Dollar amount expended	Dollar amount returned to the U.S. Treasury	Percentage of allotment returned to the U.S. Treasury
North Dakota	500,000	457,425	42,575	8.5
Ohio	5,310,180	5,310,180	0	0
Oklahoma	2,230,667	2,230,667	0	0
Oregon	2,216,643	2,216,643	0	0
Pennsylvania	5,341,822	5,279,535	62,287	1.2
Puerto Rico	2,124,039	2,124,039	0	0
Rhode Island	611,725	611,725	0	0
South Carolina	1,238,495	1,238,495	0	0
South Dakota	500,000	500,000	0	0
Tennessee	2,353,574	2,353,574	0	0
Texas	5,413,220	5,412,566	654	0 (0.01)
Utah	500,000	500,000	0	0
Vermont	500,000	500,000	0	0
Virginia	1,710,740	1,710,740	0	0
Washington	2,332,664	2,332,664	0	0
West Virginia	769,310	769,310	0	0
Wisconsin	1,955,276	1,955,276	0	0
Wyoming	500,000	498,966	1,034	0.2
Total	**$137,000,000** [a]	**$136,843,566**	**$935,861**	**0% (.001%)**

Source: Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives via the Congressional Research Service presentation of HHS data, July 2007.

[a]The total mandatory funds for this program are $140 million. However, the statute provides that a certain percentage of those funds be set aside for HHS to conduct (or fund) research, evaluation, and technical assistance.

Appendix II: Fiscal Year 2004 Chafee Education and Training Vouchers: Funds Allotted, Expended, and Returned to Federal Treasury, by State

State	Dollar amount allocated	Dollar amount expended	Dollar amount returned to the U.S. Treasury	Percentage of allotment returned to the U.S. Treasury
Alabama	$501,312	$501,312	$0	0%
Alaska	179,694	158,938	20,756	11.6
Arizona	524,273	524,273	0	0
Arkansas	249,575	249,575	0	0
California	8,519,233	8,452,447	66,786	0.8
Colorado	712,785	712,785	0	0
Connecticut	495,822	495,822	0	0
Delaware	73,625	73,625	0	0
District of Columbia	270,123	270,123	0	0
Florida	2,696,572	2,106,077	590,495	21.9
Georgia	1,018,431	1,018,431	0	0
Hawaii	229,526	228,762	764	0.3
Idaho	103,074	71,429	31,645	30.7
Illinois	2,060,822	2,060,822	0	0
Indiana	712,952	712,952	0	0
Iowa	436,007	436,007	0	0
Kansas	505,472	232,828	272,644	53.9
Kentucky	566,115	383,562	184,553	32.6
Louisiana	400,401	400,401	0	0
Maine	251,655	224,651	27,004	10.7
Maryland	994,722	546,876	447,846	45.0
Massachusetts	1,057,781	1,057,781	0	0
Michigan	1,706,505	841,705	866,800	50.7
Minnesota	672,186	633,908	39,278	5.7
Mississippi	247,412	1,795	245,617	99.3
Missouri	1,077,913	304,222	773,691	71.8
Montana	157,066	157,066	0	0
Nebraska	517,535	517,535	0	0
Nevada	138,764	138,764	0	0
New Hampshire	103,241	103,241	0	0
New Jersey	928,002	928,002	0	0
New Mexico	159,478	133,294	26,184	16.4
New York	3,454,364	3,317,873	136,491	4.0
North Carolina	785,079	785,079	0	0

State	Dollar amount allocated	Dollar amount expended	Dollar amount returned to the U.S. Treasury	Percentage of allotment returned to the U.S. Treasury
North Dakota	100,579	44,943	55,636	55.3
Ohio	1,741,616	1,282,013	459,603	26.4
Oklahoma	727,760	692,465	35,295	4.9
Oregon	723,184	424,309	298,875	41.3
Pennsylvania	1,742,780	1,640,714	102,066	5.9
Puerto Rico	693,152	497,325	195,827	28.3
Rhode Island	199,577	199,577	0	0
South Carolina	404,061	404,061	0	0
South Dakota	115,969	72,411	43,558	37.6
Tennessee	767,858	637,334	130,524	17.0
Texas	1,766,074	803,113	962,961	54.5
Utah	150,993	150,993	0	0
Vermont	120,794	120,794	0	0
Virginia	558,132	312,991	245,141	43.9
Washington	761,037	761,037	0	0
West Virginia	250,989	250,989	0	0
Wisconsin	637,913	554,677	83,236	13.1
Wyoming	87,518	87,518	0	0
Total	**$44,062,503**	**$37,719,227**	**$6,343,276**	**14.4%**

Source: Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives via the Congressional Research Service presentation of HHS data, July 2007.

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Chairman MCDERMOTT. Thank you.

Dr. Courtney.

STATEMENT OF MARK COURTNEY, PH.D., BALLMER CHAIR IN CHILD WELL-BEING, SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Dr. COURTNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am here to share the findings of a study being conducted by my colleagues and I in the States of Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa of young people aging out of foster care in those three States.

Our study involves three interviews with young people. We interviewed 732 young people when they were 17 to 18 and still in care in those three States back in 2002/2003. We followed up in 2004 with about 82 percent of them when they were on average about 19.5 years old.

The information I present today comes from those interviews. We just finished last year interviews when they were 21, but the Committee beat me to the punch, and we will not be releasing those results for a few more weeks, but later this Summer, we will.

Our study informs child welfare policy, I believe, in at least three ways. First, it provides the first comprehensive view of how foster youth are faring in the transition to adulthood in the wake of the Foster Care Independence Act.

Second, it provides a natural experiment regarding the effects of allowing young people to remain in care past 18.

Illinois allows youth to remain in care through their 21st birthday whereas Iowa and Wisconsin generally discharge youth around their 18th birthday and almost never after their 19th birthday.

Third, our interviews include questions used in nationally representative studies allowing us to compare outcomes of foster youth to youth generally.

I will focus on four study findings I believe help inform policy and practice.

First, although some of the young people we were following are faring reasonably well, more of them are having significant difficulties during the transition to adulthood.

I will give you a few examples. More than one-third had neither a high school diploma nor a general equivalency degree compared to one-tenth 19 year olds nationally. Whereas 57 percent 19 year olds nationally are enrolled in a two or 4 year college, this was true for less than one quarter of the young people we are studying.

Only about two-fifths of our study participants were employed at age 19 compared to nearly three-fifths of their peers, and even among those who were employed, 75 percent earned less than $5,000 in the last year.

Foster youth in transition were twice as likely as other 19 year olds to report not having enough money to pay their rent or mortgage or being unable to pay an utility bill. They were one and a half times more likely to report having their phone service disconnected.

Of the young people who had already left care—a lot of them in Illinois stayed in care—14 percent had been homeless at least once since leaving care and most of them had only been out of care less than a year.

Compared to other 19 year olds, foster youth in transition were more likely to report that health conditions limited their daily functioning and reported more emergency room visits and hospitalization.

About one-third of our participants suffered from mental health problems, nearly half of the young women in our study had been pregnant by age 19, that is twice the rate of their peers, about one quarter reported having children, and while both males and females were more than twice as likely as their peers to have children, they were much less likely to report being married or cohabiting.

Many of the young people in our study had experienced trouble with the law. Thirty percent of the males and 11 percent of the females reported being incarcerated at least once between 17 and 19. Many more had been arrested.

A second major study finding is that receipt of independent living services during the transition to adulthood is arguably spotty at best. We asked the young people questions about the services they received between our first and second interviews in areas of education, vocational training and employment, budgeting, health education, housing, and youth development. The only domain in which at least half of the young people reported at least one service was education, and that was only slightly more than half.

The third finding is that we found that a majority of young people, and this is probably the most relevant to you, the other ones might not sound that new to you, the majority of young people would remain in care past 18 if given the opportunity, and doing so appears to convey significant benefits to young people.

Among study youth in Illinois, that is the State that allows young people to stay in care past 18, the vast majority remained in care past their 19th birthday and over half remained in care past their 20th birthday.

About half of the young people remaining in care, however, did not live in traditional foster homes or kinship foster homes or group care. They had actually moved into some kind of supervised independent living setting. Illinois has massive investment in transitional housing.

Remaining in care past 18 was associated with increased receipt of independent living services, better access to health and mental health care, a double likelihood of being enrolled in school and a triple likelihood of being in college, and a one quarter reduction in the risk of pregnancy between ages 17 and 19. It was also associated with a decreased risk of some forms of criminal justice system involvement.

Fourth, our study provides evidence and supports what the young people said earlier of the need for practitioners and policy makers to focus much more on the family relations of foster youth given the importance of these relationships to most if not all of these youth.

Over one-third of our study participants actually lived with a relative at the time of our follow up interview with them, and the vast majority, over 75 percent, reported feeling very close to one or more members of their family of origin.

In summary, many of the young people are not doing well. The glass is still less than half full with respect to the independent living service provision. Most young people, at least from what we can find, would choose to stay in care, affiliated with a system, connected to the system, if they had the choice, staying in care conveys significant benefits to them.

Lastly, we really need to pay more attention to family relations. I look forward to answering your questions.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Courtney follows:]

Prepared Statement of Mark Courtney, Ph.D., Ballmer Chair in Child Well-Being, School of Social Work, University of Washington

Today I share with you the findings of a study being conducted by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago and the state public child welfare agencies in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin, following young people as they "age out" of the foster care system. Our study involves three interviews with young people. We interviewed 732 youth in 2002 and 2003 who were 17 or 18 years old and still under the jurisdiction of the child welfare agency and followed up in 2004 with 603 (or 82 percent) of these young people when they were on average about 19 and a half years old. The information I present today comes from these interviews. Reports from a third wave of interviews conducted last year when the respondents were 21 will be available later this summer.

Our study informs child welfare policy in at least three ways. First, it provides the only comprehensive view of how foster youth are faring in the transition to adulthood since the Foster Care Independence Act became law. Second, it provides a natural experiment regarding the effects of allowing youth to remain in foster care past age 18; Illinois allows youth to remain in care through their 21st birthday, whereas Iowa and Wisconsin generally discharge youth around their 18th birthday and almost never later than their 19th birthday. Third, our interviews include questions used in nationally representative studies, allowing us to compare experiences of foster youth to those of other young people. I will focus on four study findings that I believe help inform policy and practice.

First, although some of the young people are faring reasonably well, more of them are having significant difficulties during the transition to adulthood. Few of them are obtaining the education necessary to succeed in today's economy. More than one third had neither a high school diploma nor a general equivalency degree compared to one-tenth of 19 year olds nationally. Perhaps most troublingly, whereas about 57 percent of 19 year olds nationally are enrolled in a two—or four-year college, this was true for less than one-quarter of the current and former foster youth in our study. Only about two-fifths of our study participants were employed at age 19, compared to nearly three-fifths of their peers; over three-quarters of those who had worked in the past year had earned less than $5,000. Foster youth in transition were twice as likely as other 19-year-olds to report not having enough money to pay their rent or mortgage (12 percent) or to be unable to pay a utility bill (12 percent) and 1.5 times more likely to report having their phone service disconnected (21 percent). Fourteen percent of those discharged from care reported having been homeless at least once since leaving care. Compared to other 19 year olds, foster youth in transition were more likely to report that health conditions limited their daily functioning and reported more emergency room visits and hospitalizations. About one-third of our study participants suffered from mental health problems we assessed, including post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and depression. Nearly half of the young women in our study had been pregnant by age 19, twice as many as their peers. About one-quarter of the young people reported having children. While both males and females were more than twice as likely as other 19 year olds to report having a child, they were less likely to report being married or cohabiting. Many of the young people in our study had experienced trouble with the law; 30 percent of the males and 11 percent of the females reported being incarcerated at least once between our first and follow-up interviews. They were more likely than other 19 year olds to report engaging in criminal behavior and being victims of crime.

A second major study finding is that receipt of independent living services during the transition to adulthood is arguably spotty at best. We asked the young people questions about the services they received between our first and second wave of interviews in six domains: education; vocational training and employment; budgeting and financial management; health education; housing; and services to promote

youth development. The only domain in which at least half of the young adults reported receiving at least one service was educational support.

Third, we found that a majority of young people would remain in care past age 18 if given the opportunity and that doing so appears to convey significant benefits. Among study youth in Illinois, the vast majority remained in care past their 19th birthday and over half remained past their 20th birthday. About half of the young people remaining in care lived in traditional family foster care, kinship care, or group care, but about half moved on to various forms of supervised independent-living. Remaining in care past 18 was associated with increased receipt of independent living services, better access to health and mental health care, a doubled likelihood of being in school and tripled likelihood of being in college, and a one-quarter reduction in the risk of pregnancy between ages 17–18 and 19. It was also associated with a decreased risk of some forms of criminal justice system involvement.

Fourth, our study provides evidence of the need for practitioners and policymakers to focus more on the family relations of foster youth, given the importance of these relationships to foster youth in transition to adulthood. Over one-third of our study participants lived with a relative at the time of their follow-up interview and the vast majority of all the young people reported feeling very close to one or more members of their family of origin.

I look forward to answering your questions and discussing the policy implications of our study's findings.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Thank you.

Mr. Stangler.

STATEMENT OF GARY STANGLER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, JIM CASEY YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE

Mr. STANGLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My name is Gary Stangler. I am Executive Director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. We are a national foundation devoted exclusively to the issue of youth aging out of foster care. We were formed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation out of Baltimore and Casey Family Programs out of Seattle.

We have been doing this work for 6 years and prior to this, I was the Director of the Missouri Department of Social Services under both Republican and Democratic Governors.

I was the Commissioner during the nineties when we did welfare reform, with the passage of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.

I would say that at that time, the creativity, the innovation, the ideas that were bubbling up in the States and that were promoted in the Federal Act is something that we have not seen in Chafee.

As the GAO report just noted, the States have been pretty slow to even spend the money that Congress made available. They have been slow to exercise the Medicaid option.

I would say in my experience over the last couple of years, this has really begun to change. I think the States lacked good practice models. They lacked good notions of what to do with this difficult population.

Since then, we have had Mark Courtney's research, Peter Pecora's, Casey Family Programs, alumni studies, and I think as GAO just noted, you have seen the States increasing the uptake of the spending.

What I would argue is what we need for Congress to do to capture the momentum we are just beginning to see over the last 2 years in the States in several areas. The first, Mr. Chairman, you

started by saying you have not met a foster kid who did not want to go home or who did not want to stay connected to their parents or family. I would say I have not either, in the 25 years I have been doing this.

I have come to believe that the drive for family is hard wired in us and that it should be national policy and a national goal that no child leaves foster care that does not have a connection to an adult, a supportive adult, preferably a legal relationship, guardianship, kinship, reunification, adoption, something that has a sense of forever and unconditional support attached to it.

You heard it eloquently from the young people earlier. I think the States are starting to make progress in this area for a couple of reasons. One innovation is paying attention to what the youth themselves have to say. We have largely ignored them over the past years in child welfare practice and ignoring the fact that they often knew who the family members were, who the relatives were that could provide support and be a permanent placement.

I think second we should for those kids who cannot be reunited, that we need to move quickly on termination of parental rights, but there are going to be kids who are going to be considered—Tyler sat up here and said I was considered unadoptable. There are going to be kids for whom adoption is not an option.

For them, we need kinship care. We need guardianship. We need Federal subsidies, and we need to extend Title IV–E reimbursement to the States for foster care to 21. Stopping at age 18 is arbitrary in my opinion, and as you heard eloquently from them, we need to extend this to 21 on a voluntary basis, but importantly, I think, with a clear right of return.

Again, citing Tyler. He thought he was going to be 18. He thought he was going to be a grown up. He was going to be a man now. He was going to go out there. He quickly found it ain't so great out there and it's a little harder than he thought.

We need to allow kids to come back into care and for many States after discharge, that is it, case is closed. There is no right of return. We need to allow a right of return.

I believe all States should exercise the Medicaid option under Chafee that Congress has provided. In the past 6 months, I think you have seen Michigan, Florida, Washington State, Missouri following now to exercise the Chafee option. I think States are starting to move toward it. I think any incentive or push that can come from Congress would be a good thing.

The progress with the education and training vouchers, this is an area where the States had great difficulty. I think we have seen great progress there through innovations in marketing, in reaching out to kids.

I would cite a case in Northern Michigan where they assigned a part time worker to exclusively work with this population. She alone was able to triple the number of kids moving to postsecondary education.

Finally, in the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities ten projects, we have what we call an Opportunity Passport. It is a matched savings account. We are just now getting data from 2,000 kids who have had these matched savings accounts. What we are finding is that foster kids can save. In our IDA, they can save for a car or

a security deposit on an apartment in addition to the normal educational expenses, medical expenses.

Anthony Reeves mentioned that he was able to save a security deposit. That is how he did it, with this Opportunity Passport. It is a critical way to overcome the barrier of not having the financial resources to buy a car, that allows you to go to school and work in this country.

I think that is a critical necessity if you are going to do that, and our data is beginning to show that not only kids can save, but they can save for assets that lead to better economic and educational outcomes.

I would urge the Congress as you explore other options a demonstration project with IDAs that would include this. It may be relevant to Mr. Stark's notion of a trust fund for foster kids because anything that a kid can save whether it would come from child support payments or other payments on his behalf could be suitable for this kind of model.

I thank you for inviting me and I would be happy to answer your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Stangler follows:]

Prepared Statement of Gary Stangler, Executive Director, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Representative Weller, and members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify today.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is a national foundation focused solely on helping states and communities assist older youth in foster care make successful transitions to adulthood. We are a grantmaking foundation, supporting demonstration projects in both rural and urban areas in 10 States from Michigan to Georgia to Maine to California. Our strategies focus on improving the outcomes of transitioning youth, outcomes that ultimately build into two key areas that we know will help these young adults thrive: providing opportunities to achieve economic success and helping them build permanent relationships in their lives. We were created by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs, the nation's two largest foundations devoted to disadvantaged youth and their families.

Our foundation has been doing this work for six years, and I have been involved in child welfare for 25 years. Prior to this position, I was the director of the Missouri Department of Social Services, appointed first by Republican Governor John Ashcroft and re-appointed to office by Democratic Governor Mel Carnahan.

We have learned a great deal about older youth in foster care these past several years. Out of more than half a million kids placed in foster care due to parental abuse or neglect, more than 100,000 are over age 16. Roughly 24,000 young people "age out" every year—that means they are discharged from the child welfare system when they turn 18. In fact, the number of young people leaving foster care without a permanent family is at an all-time high, according to a new report by The Pew Charitable Trusts' Kids Are Waiting campaign and the Jim Casey Initiative. Even though the total number of children in foster care has decreased, the number who "age out" of the system has grown by 41 percent since 1998. In total, more than 165,000 young people aged out of foster care between 1998 and 2005—nearly 25,000 in 2005 alone. At the same time, that study also found that those young adults who "age out" spent more time in the foster care system: nearly five years, compared to the national average of 2½ years.

These young people, unlike mine or yours, lack a stable family foundation from which they can move into adulthood. Many of these youth have not had the typical experiences growing up that teach skills for self-sufficiency, especially those youth emancipating from group care. Suddenly, at age 18, they're on their own. As a result, they often have trouble finding a place to live, finding and keeping a job, getting health insurance, continuing their education, avoiding financial trouble and making good decisions. For these youth, there are no parents there to advise them or help them recover from the bad judgments that teenagers are prone to make.

Imagine your old 18-year-old trying to make it alone. What state your child lives in determines what choices and options are available. In most states, there will be

financial aid for college; in some states a waiver of tuition at public colleges that mimics the absent parental support. In a few states, there will be health insurance available under Medicaid. For a limited number of youth, there will be some financial assistance for a place to live.

With our own children, we don't tell them they can have college help, but no health insurance. For many of us, our employer-based health insurance covers our dependents into their twenties. And, most important, we would be there to cheer their successes and console them during the inevitable crises of growing up.

The picture for youth who have aged out of care is fairly bleak, according to recent research at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Those who left foster care by age 18 were nearly three times more likely than their peers to be out of work and school. They were twice as likely to be unable to pay their rent and were four times as likely to be evicted. Fewer than half had bank accounts. Nearly half of the young women had been pregnant at least once by age 19. Significant numbers were incarcerated or homeless at some point.

Only half of youth in foster care finish high school, which is not at all surprising considering that most youth are discharged at age 18, an age when most kids are likely to still be in high school. Only 20 percent who are qualified for college actually go on to post-secondary education. And only 5 percent of those in college finish their degrees. Low educational attainment guarantees poor economic and financial outcomes.

Clearly, this is one of our nation's most vulnerable populations of young people, with high social costs for homelessness, unemployment, and, for some, correctional costs. As you well know, in 1999, Congress provided assistance for these young adults through the Foster Care Independence Act. The act doubled federal funding to $140 million for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, which provides funds for states to help youth in foster care with life skills training, education and employment supports, connections to adults, and housing assistance. States are required to contribute a 20 percent match for Chafee funds. Overall, the amount of funding available isn't enough to provide a comprehensive array of services to all emancipating youth. States find themselves patching together additional educational, mental health, and job training services across various agencies, but often, these services are not well coordinated. Many youth are left to navigate multiple bureaucracies on their own.

During the years since passage of Chafee, states have had difficulty taking advantage of these flexible funds. I was the Missouri state director and chair of the National Council of State Human Services Administrators during the years when welfare reform was launched. At that time, new ideas and innovations were widespread, and they led to significant improvements on a national scale. I have not seen that kind of innovation and creativity with Chafee, until very recently.

I believe that the difficulty for the states arose because states lacked good practice models and good policies for helping this population. With the research from studies like Mark Courtney's Midwest Evaluation and Peter Pecora's alumni studies, we have a clearer picture of the difficulties faced by this group of young people. And with advances in helping youth connect to families and build for economic success, this picture is beginning to change.

Part of this change is better understanding of what it takes to improve the bleak outcomes. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative has five strategies that, we believe, taken together will improve the outcomes in education, employment, health, housing, personal connections, and community engagement for this population. We are learning that actively engaging youth, increasing opportunities, building community partnerships and resources, collecting the research data and communicating effectively, and building public will to improve state policy and practice must all take place for progress to be achieved. As is the case for our own children, we weave together the stability of permanent family and building the skills to be successful in modern society.

This work has shown us repeatedly that what these young adults want most is permanence. They want a family relationship—reunified with their parents, safely living with relatives, legal guardians, or adoptive families, but certainly living in a relationship that has a strong sense of "forever." For many of these youth, their closest relationships are ephemeral, professional ones with social workers and attorneys. This is not a family.

We no longer accept that teens in foster care do not need permanent connections as they enter adulthood. On the contrary, we know that preparation for adulthood is inextricably linked to permanence.

It should be national policy, and a nationally measured goal, to ensure that every youth leaving foster care be connected to a family for ongoing support.

In policy terms, the federal government should set this clear expectation for the States. I also strongly support the recommendation of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care that the federal government should provide financial incentives for all forms of permanency: reunification, kinship, guardianship, and adoption.

In addition to this primacy on permanence, the federal and state governments should:

- strongly encourage the states to take advantage of the option under Chafee to extend Medicaid to age 21;
- extend Title IV–E reimbursement for foster care to age 21, including the right to return to foster care after discharge or case closing; and
- provide reimbursement to subsidize kinship and guardianship.

These are the basic building blocks of health, safety, and permanence, which are the goals for children taken into our custody.

If there is one clear finding that emerges from the Midwest Evaluation, it is that those young adults who could remain in foster care past age 18 until 21 had better outcomes. This is intuitively obvious given what we understand about the importance of permanence. But states have been very slow to extend foster care past age 18. Only a handful have made progress in this area, largely due to the fact that the federal government stops sharing in the cost. We need to extend the availability of federal support and incentives for foster care to age 21 in all states with reimbursement from Title IV–E. This must include the right to return to foster care after discharge or case closing. For many teenagers, the need for such support becomes clear only after being on their own for a period of time. We must allow them the opportunity to return to foster care for critical supports.

States are beginning to innovate on ways to connect youth to supportive family members. Perhaps the single most important "innovation" has been to listen to the youth themselves, who are often the best resources on who might be appropriate family members. Youth are often excluded even from the judicial processes that direct their lives, many not even aware that they have legal representation. The move to engaging youth directly in decisions that affect their lives is an overdue and critical change in policy, practice, and in how we approach casework training.

Recently, *60 Minutes* featured a software service called *Family Finding,* which searches public databases to identify extended family members. Oklahoma has co-located child welfare and child support enforcement staff to increase the potential connections to family. Many jurisdictions are using intensive Team Decision Making practice models to identify and prepare family members to support youth aging out.

Let me give you additional examples of state innovation. With most youth emancipating at age 18, continuing their education is essential to their chances of life and economic success. Congress created the Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) to help address this issue, but the states have been slow to take advantage of this federal support. This has begun to change. In Michigan, only 127 youth received the supports of the Education and Training Vouchers in FY2004. In fact, Michigan had only been asking for half of the funds available to the state. In FY2006, the number of youth had doubled to almost 300, and in the first eight months of this year, already 220 youth have received ETVs.

How did they do this? They accomplished this through significant increase in marketing, plus lots of education by youth panels and professionals targeted to Department of Human Services staff, college financial aid officers, high school counselors, foster parents, court staff, guardians ad litem, multi-agency state permanency task force, and foster youth. Of course the efforts of all the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative sites to get the word out had an impact.

In the ten-county area in the rural north of the state, having a part-time education planner (10 hours/week for 10 counties) more than tripled post-secondary enrollments in one year. This caseworker began working with the youth in junior and senior years of high school to help make sure they had a plan to graduate from high school, identify financial resources, and fill out paperwork for financial aid and applications.

Ashley, from northern Michigan, says: "Without Kallie (caseworker) I just wouldn't have gone to college. I probably would have stayed home and taken a couple of classes from the community college but I didn't ever think I could be a real student at a 4-year college. She helped me believe that I could do it, but most of all helped me get through all the paperwork I needed to do, like FAFSA and the things I need for ETV, and applications just to get in. I just finished my freshman year and I can't wait to go back in the fall."

Arrica (Macomb County, near Detroit): "For me, ETV has been a major financial contributor to me being able to go to college. I will be graduating from Oakland University next spring and it would not be possible if it was not for the ETV. I no

longer worry about being able to pay for college, along with the Pell grant and TIP all my worries are gone, now I'm able to focus on contributing to society in a positive way and not focus on my past that may result in a cycle (of foster care) for my family."

Michigan is a good example of innovation to help kids continue post-secondary education. The creative deployment of a part-time caseworker *tripled* the number of youth continuing their education.

Michigan is not alone in helping youth continue their education. Florida just eased restrictive polices to allow part-time school attendance, and extended the age of assistance through the 23rd birthday. Iowa just passed legislation greatly expanding the amount of aid available, and extended it to private colleges and universities as well as state schools. These innovations have also led to clearer notions of what it takes to promote educational success for youth lacking traditional family supports, such as the expenses of off-campus housing, child care to attend school, and things as simple as where one can go during school breaks when other young people head home to their families.

And recently, the number of states exercising the option under Chafee to provide Medicaid has increased. Yet still, fewer than half of the states have taken advantage of this option and the matching funds. But just this year, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Washington, and Missouri have extended Medicaid to youth aging out of foster care to age 21. In Colorado, the expansion included better coordination with the state mental health services system.

States have also developed innovations recognizing the importance of sibling connections. The disruption of sibling relationships is the most frequently expressed concern by young people across the Initiative's sites. In Maine, the local youth leadership board led the successful effort to pass legislation for sibling visitation rights. Iowa's legislature recently funded a demonstration project to promote sibling relationships. Colorado just passed legislation creating a statewide task force on permanence and foster care.

We must also continue to develop and support innovations and promising ways to help these young adults achieve independence successfully. Our goal must be to integrate family permanency and preparation for adulthood, which is what we do as parents for our own kids. Economic success in modern society requires post-secondary education, financial literacy, and building personal and financial assets.

We have several key components we believe will provide opportunities for both economic success and permanence for these young people. To date, the communities in our Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative have worked with more than 2,100 young people, ages 14 to 23, who have or will transition from foster care. One key component is the Opportunity Passport™ which is designed to organize resources and create opportunities for young people leaving foster care. The Opportunity Passport? has three distinct elements:

- A personal debit account to be used to pay for short-term expenses;
- A matched savings account, also known as an Individual Development Account (IDA), to be used for specific assets, such as education expenses and housing down payments/deposits.
- Door openers, a host of opportunities to be developed on a local basis. Examples include pre-approval for registration for community college courses or expedited access to job-training or adult education courses.

The Opportunity Passport™ helps participants learn financial management; obtain experience with the banking system; save money for education, housing, health care, and other specified expenses; and gain streamlined access to educational, training, and vocational opportunities.

Through the Opportunity Passport™, young people are trained in financial literacy: money matters, such as how to budget, how to balance a checkbook, how to use credit wisely, how to avoid the predatory lending system, and getting a loan that they can repay. All Opportunity Passport™ participants have bank accounts, compared to only half of young people who have aged out of care in the Midwest Evaluation. Saving is encouraged with a one-to-one match in an Individual Development Account, or IDA, that they can use to buy assets that build future economic success, such as educational expenses, housing, and cars to get to work and school, medical expenses or to start a business.

The Opportunity Passport™ IDA differs from that in the Assets for Independence Act (AFIA). This design provides match for the purchase of cars and security deposits for rental apartments or houses, not just down payments for home purchase. The security deposit is often the barrier to being able to find a place to live. The match for their savings for down payment or purchase of a car includes licensing fees and insurance. A car is an absolute necessity to have a job and/or continue going to

school. Consider rural northern Michigan, or the state of Maine, where transportation to school and work is nearly impossible without a car. Transportation is no less a barrier in Atlanta or Denver. Being able to save for a car is also a motivator to continue saving, thereby learning money management skills.

We have seen a level of success: One in four of Opportunity Passport™ participants have purchased assets with the most common purchases being cars, housing and education expenses. To date, these young people have saved more than $1.33 million and have bought 715 assets, including, 363 vehicles, 144 home or apartment security or down payments, 119 education expenses, 45 investments, 23 medical expenses and 21 starting businesses. That's actually more than low-income adults who participated in the American Dream Demonstration, the national IDA evaluation. In three years and with a two-to-one match, those adults saved $1.31 million and bought 631 assets.

The Opportunity Passport™ has helped Bill Schramm, 21, start a very successful DJ business in Traverse City, Michigan as well as buy a 1985 Toyota and pay off some medical bills. In Nashville, it has helped Dakota Irsik, 20, invest his savings to build a reserve fund. And several young people in Atlanta, Detroit, and elsewhere have used it to buy their very own homes. In some of those cases, our sites work with the local United Ways who support IDAs and have funds under AFIA. They are able to raise the level of match to 4–1 for home purchases, an approved asset under the federal program.

I urge Congress to enact authorization for matched savings accounts, or IDAs, for youth transitioning from foster care that would include assets such as a car and security deposits for housing rentals. Particularly in rural areas, there is no alternative to a car to get work or school. And at least one research project, Wheels to Work, has shown significant increases in income for people able to buy a car. States also can support an IDA that would match savings, child support payments made on behalf of the youth, and any other income for youth in foster care, and use the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative model of approvable assets for purchases with the match.

It is important to stress that our experience in 10 sites across the country confirms the necessity to integrate connections and permanence with financial and economic strategies. We conclude from our data that a stand-alone IDA is unlikely to succeed. The ability to build assets and manage financially is closely linked to connections and supports.

As I mentioned earlier, a cornerstone of the work of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is youth engagement and youth leadership. All 10 of our sites have youth leadership boards. These have proven to be remarkable and invaluable sources of connections, peer support, and leadership development.

We firmly believe that youth voices need to be heard in decisions affecting their case deposition and that youth engagement permeates policy and legislative decision-making. Youth boards in Michigan and Georgia have become national models that others seek to emulate. In Michigan, for instance, the youth board published a set of policy recommendations to policymakers, called *Voices*, and presented it to Department of Human Services Director and key DHS staff. Youth board members also met with their legislators as well as key committee members and chairs. Governor Jennifer Granholm invited them to meet with her and her Cabinet to present *Voices*. That meeting resulted in top government officials volunteering to be mentors for older youth in and out of care and in several departments giving priority to foster youth for paid internships and summer jobs. The Michigan youth boards from Detroit and the northern counties are now working on a second edition, noting that 16 of their 21 recommendations have been achieved or seen significant improvement. Georgia has produced a similar document called *Empowerment*.

We need better data about what states are doing with their independent living programs under Chafee. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) finally has proposed rules about this, that if adopted may require states to report data next year to the National Youth Transition Database. Still, the HHS proposal has shortcomings: States will have to report on outcomes for 60 percent of youth who have left care (or for all youth in small states). The challenges of data collection are immense, but the penalties for noncompliance are nominal. We are concerned that states will risk the penalties rather than track down youth who have left care. Without this data, we have no measure of how our funding, policies, and practices are impacting the life outcomes for these youth. These long-awaited rules for a National Youth Transition Database should be implemented soon.

To summarize, I would respectfully ask the Congress to adopt the following recommendations to make major progress in improving the bleak outcomes that we see in the population of young people aging out of foster care:

1. It should be the national policy, and a nationally measured goal, that every child emancipating from foster care have a connection to a supportive family.

2. Federal financial participation should be available to the states for kinship, guardianship, and adoption, and the financial incentives to the states should be for all forms of permanence.

3. Reimbursement under Title IV–E should be available to the states for foster care up to age 21, on a voluntary basis and with a clear right to return to foster care.

4. All states should exercise the Medicaid option under Chafee for youth emancipating from foster care to age 21.

5. Congress should recognize the progress made by the states by continuing the Education and Training Vouchers, with incentives to the states to recognize the flexibility needed for this highly vulnerable population, allowing part-time school attendance, extending the age of eligibility to 25 to allow for college completion, and recognizing the unique needs of this population for housing, child care, and options for housing during school vacations.

6. Congress should recognize the need for financial literacy and assets for this population and authorize Individual Development Accounts demonstration projects for youth emancipating from foster care, including more flexibility to include cars and rental housing as assets necessary to economic success and as incentives for participation. Traditional youth IDAs have a poor record, and must be altered for those lacking the support of family members.

There is momentum building among the states to implement innovative strategies to improve the outcomes for this population. I urge Congress to capture this momentum, and exert national leadership. Our knowledge base on what we need to do has grown greatly the past few years, and the opportunity to make substantial progress is at hand. The net benefit, and the net savings, are measurable and within our reach.

Young people in transition display a remarkable spirit of resiliency. They have a powerful drive for family—one that I believe is hard-wired in our beings. They show it in every setting and in every way. Resilience is amazing. Resilience based on stability and permanence in their lives is priceless. And it is the base for the success in life that we want to see for all our children.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to address the committee.

This concludes my testimony, and I welcome your questions.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Mr. Cobbs?

STATEMENT OF SAM COBBS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FIRST PLACE FOR YOUTH

Mr. COBBS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My name is Sam Cobbs. I am the Executive Director of First Place for Youth. I would once again like to thank you for the invitation to appear this prestigious body.

First Place for Youth is a community based social service agency located in the San Francisco Bay area, whose mission is to support youth in their transition from foster care to adulthood by promoting choices and strengthening individual and community resources.

First Place works to ensure that all foster youth have the opportunity to experience a safe supported transition from care.

Before I continue on, I would actually like for you to take a trip down memory lane with me.

Please think back to your 18th birthday or your high school graduation, whichever trip is shorter. Think back, what was that like for you? Did your parents throw you a big party? Was it a quiet day with a few family and friends? What presents did you receive?

What was next for you? College? Taking a year off to travel. How excited were you about what your future held? How confident were you that you could do anything that you wanted and that you had

people who were a part of your life that would help you accomplish it?

Now, put yourself in the shoes of transitioning foster care youth and think about those days again. The same days that most of us just thought about with feelings of happiness and excitement are the same days that former foster youth describe as having a huge knot in their stomach from anticipating a pending doom, because it is on a foster youth's birthday that we tell them happy birthday, and now get out and fend for yourself.

A year ago I received a phone call from a young lady that illustrates the conflict of emotions youth have leaving the foster care system. The call from this young woman started on a happy note because she had received news that she had enough high school credits to graduate in 2 weeks. The call ended with her in tears. She realized that her social worker would have no other choice but to release her from their care and that she had nowhere to go.

Cheryl, now a participant in the First Place program, reported that she was so angry on her graduation night because she had to pack her bags in preparation to move from her foster home instead of hanging out with her friends and enjoying her accomplishments.

Then she added that at least she had luggage. It was not like the other friends exiting foster care that moved the year prior who had to pack their belongings in black plastic bags. I will come back a little later to tell you about that luggage.

As I have so often heard Karen Bass, an Assembly member in the California State legislature say in regards to this issue "It is not just wrong what we do to your foster youth in this country, but it is morally unacceptable."

At First Place, we pick up where our Government system abruptly ends its responsibility for youth it once removed from their families and homes and agreed to care for.

We provide critical services for transitioning youth for the first time when they need it most, when they are attempting to make the critical transition from adolescence to adulthood.

First Place provides support services that at their core offers permanency, provides safe affordable housing, and the opportunity for true self sufficiency through vocational and education support.

"Permanency" is a word that you will hear thrown around as you research this issue. You may have a hard time understanding what this word means in the context of transitioning youth as I once did. However, I think I can spare you a lot of time by telling you what I found when I stopped reading the literature and started looking around me and listening to the youth.

"Permanency" to them means having their picture on somebody else's wall in their house. "Permanency" means having someone to call, not only when you need support, but to also share important occasions in your life, like your wedding, your graduation from college, or because you have just spearheaded policies that will improve the lives of America's foster youth.

Connecting young people to adults that they choose to be a part of their life versus someone else choosing for them is a critical element of the success of the First Place program.

However, if I had to give you the key ingredient to the First Place secret sauce of success, it would be that for the first time in

these youth's lives, it is all up to them. They now have the opportunity to take control of their own lives and whatever happens from that day that they walk into our building to a future where their potential is limitless, this is a very important aspect to consider as you propose legislation and move policy changes forward.

Please do not duplicate the "luggage solution." Remember my story about Cheryl? She recalls seeing other foster care youth move their belongings out to the streets of our cities in plastic garbage bags that were chosen because they were big enough to fit the contents of their entire lives.

After independent living skills programs and child welfare officials found out about this, they began to buy luggage for youth who were leaving care. However, I contend they were shortsighted and missed the point. Cheryl and other youth took their luggage to homeless shelters when they left the system.

I ask that you not enact legislation whether or not it is the extension of Title IV–E funding until age 21, which provides critical support to foster youth at this critical transition, but do it in a way that replicates what we do at First Place, through an unique partnership with State, social service, and private resources. We give the youth the chance to practice being interdependent, to make mistakes that they can learn from, and to have reference points and supporters to come back to in the future.

Policy reform must seek to integrate youth in a positive safe community that is diverse and does not relegate them to the former foster youth compound.

Create a way that they are not only being cared for and supported, but that there are also high expectations for them that they can and will live up to.

We often talk in the field that foster youth are our children and that we must treat them as we would our own children. We must then have the same expectations for foster youth that we have for our own children, in the unwavering commitments all parents have to help their children achieve their dreams and create a future where they are safe, healthy, and feel valued by society in their community.

Our laws and how we allocate funds must reflect this widely felt and often repeated commitment. By cutting them off from meaningful support on the day they leave care rather than contemplating a bright future that they are in charge of, they are concerned with where they will sleep that night.

We know how to facilitate a successful transition for youth. It is very cost effective. It costs First Place about $20,000 a year to provide these services. I would hope that you would do this not only because it is a financial savings, but because we are morally obligated to support our youth.

Thank you. I am sorry I went over.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Cobbs follows:]

Prepared Statement of Sam Cobbs, Executive Director, First Place Fund for Youth, Oakland, California

Hello. I am Sam Cobbs, Executive Director of First Place for Youth and I would like to thank you for the invitation to appear before this prestigious body today. First Place for Youth is a community-based social service agency located in the San Francisco Bay Area whose mission is to support youth in their transition from foster

care to adulthood by promoting choices and strengthening individual and community resources. First Place works to ensure that all foster youth have the opportunity to experience a safe supported transition from foster care. Before I continue, I would like you to indulge me in a trip down memory lane.

Please think back to your 18th birthday or your high school graduation, whichever trip is shorter. Think about what that was like for you. Did your parents throw you a big party or was it a quiet day with just a few family and friends? What presents did you receive? What was next for you—college or taking a year off to traveling? How excited were you about what your future held? How confident were you that you could do anything that you wanted and that you had people who were a part of your life that would help you accomplish it? Now, put yourself in the shoes of transitioning foster care youth and think about those days again. The same days that most of us just thought about with feelings of happiness and excitement are the same days that former foster youth describe as having a huge knot in their stomach from anticipating a pending doom. Because it is on a foster youth's 18th birthday that we tell them happy birthday and now get out and fend for yourself!

A year ago, I received a phone call from a young lady that illustrates the conflicted emotions youth leaving foster care face. The call from this young woman started on a happy note because she had received the news that she had enough high school credits to graduate in two weeks. The call ended in tears because she realized that her social worker would have no other choice but to release her from their care and that she had no place to go. "Cheryl," now a participant in the First Place program, reported that she was angry on her graduation night because she had to pack her bags in preparation to move from her foster home instead of hanging out with her friends and enjoying her accomplishment. Then, she added that at least she had luggage and was not like her other friends exiting foster care that moved the year prior and had to pack their belongings in black plastic bags. I will come back a little later to tell you more about that luggage.

As I have so often heard Karen Bass, a Senator in the California State legislature say in regards to this issue . . . "It is not just wrong what we do with to our foster youth in this country but that it is morally unacceptable." At First Place we pick up where our government system abruptly ends its responsibility for the youth it once removed from their families and homes and agreed to care for. We provide critical services for transitioning foster youth at the time that they need it most—when they are attempting to make the critical transition from adolescence to adulthood. First Place provides support services that at their core offers permanency, provide safe affordable housing, and the opportunity for true self-sufficiency through vocational and educational support.

"Permanency" is a word that you will hear thrown around as you research this issue. You may have a hard time understanding what that word means in the context of transitioning youth as I once did. However, I think I can spare you a lot of time by telling you what I found when I stopped reading the literature and started looking around me and listening to the youth. Permanency to them means having their picture on someone else's wall in their house. Permanency means having someone to call not only when you need support but to also to share important occasions in your life like your wedding, your graduation from college, or because you have spearheaded policies that will improve the lives of America's foster youth. Connecting young people to adults that **they** choose to be a part of their lives versus someone else choosing for them is a critical element of the success of the First Place Program.

However, if I had to give you the **key** ingredient to the First Place secret sauce of success, it would be that for the first time in these youths' lives, it is all up to them. They now have the opportunity to take control of their own lives and whatever happens from the day that they walk into our building to a future where their potential is limitless. This is a very important aspect to consider as you propose legislation and move policy changes forward. Please do not duplicate the "luggage solution."

Remember my story about Cheryl? She recalled seeing other former foster care youth moving their belongings out to the streets of our cities in plastic black garbage bags that were chosen because they were big enough to fit the contents of their entire lives. After Independent Living Skills Programs and child welfare officials found out about this they began to buy luggage for youth who were leaving care! However, I contend they were shortsighted and missed the point because Cheryl and the other youth took their luggage to a homeless shelter when they left the system. I ask that you enact legislation, whether or not it is the extension of Title IV–E funding until age 21, which provides meaningful support to foster youth at this crucial transition, but do it in a way that replicates what we do at First Place through a unique partnership between state social services and private resources: we give

youth the chance to practice being interdependent, to make mistakes that they can learn from, and have reference points and supporters to come back to in the future. Policy reform must seek to integrate youth into a positive safe community that is diverse and does not relegate them to the former foster youth compound. Create a way that they are not only being cared for and supported but that there are high expectations for them that they can and will live up to. We often talk in the field that foster youth are our children and that we must treat them as we would our own children. We must then have the same expectation for foster youth that we have for our own children and the unwavering commitment all parents have to help their children achieve their dreams and create a future where they are safe, healthy and feel valued by society and their community. Our laws and how we allocate funds must reflect this widely felt and often repeated commitment. By cutting them off from meaningful support, on the day they leave care, rather than contemplating a bright future that they are in charge of, they are concerned with where they will sleep at night and how they will support themselves. Nice luggage does little to remedy the reality of many of these youths' futures. By embracing these principles wholeheartedly First Place youth are achieving positive outcomes:

- 80% of First Place graduates maintained permanent, safe, affordable housing after exiting the program.
- 83% obtained employment at an average wage of $9.73 per hour
- 100% of youth who are parents retained custody of their children, ending the often intergenerational cycle of foster care involvement
- 95% of young mothers did not have another child
- 94% of participants maintained health insurance and sought out wellness care
- 70% enrolled in post-secondary education

We know what we need to do to facilitate the successful transition of foster youth to adulthood. The financial costs to achieve these outcomes are reasonable and should be seen by all of us as a bargain. It costs about $20,000 a year for us to house and provide services to former foster youth. We are able to do this in an area that has one of the highest costs of living in the country. We truly believe that if it can be successfully done here, it can be done anywhere. This cost is minimal in comparison to the cost of long term shelter stays, institutional care, public benefit use, and incarceration, which foster youth who exit care without support are at higher risk for experiencing than their peers. It is a wise and necessary investment that has great returns in the creation of productive, educated, and responsible citizens that contribute to our communities. You may be persuaded that youth leaving foster care need and deserve support as they leave state care because it is a financially sound and cost-saving decision. I hope that you are also persuaded that we as a society are morally obligated to provide support and opportunities to these youth who are our responsibility and our most valuable resources.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Thank you.

Ms. Soltis.

STATEMENT OF JANE SOLTIS, PROGRAM OFFICER, ECKERD FAMILY FOUNDATION

Ms. SOLTIS. Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Representative Weller and Members of the Committee. It is my pleasure to be here today.

The Independent Living Services Advisory Council is a legislatively mandated council in Florida that advises the legislature as well as the Department of Children and Families on the status of independent living services. I am privileged to Chair this Council.

The Eckerd Family Foundation, which I also represent, has invested more than $20 million over the last 8 years in Florida, North Carolina, and Delaware to enhance foster care, juvenile justice, and education programs.

Youth aging out of foster care is one of the Foundation's priorities. We have piloted a successful set of strategies called Connected by 25 in Hillsborough County, Florida, and are replicating

this project in two other counties with our partners, Jim Casey and countless other individuals, civic and private funders.

I want to emphasize that this investment of private resources is not designed to replace government's essential responsibility for child welfare services, but rather to enhance independent living services so that the outcomes for these youth are improved.

In our Connected by 25, we have learned that when the ordinary citizen is educated about the reality of life for these young people, that they have been very responsive. They see them as our children, that we should do no less for them than we do for our own.

As a result, we have seen unprecedented public/private partnerships developed within our community based child welfare system, and we need to support those partnerships.

Private philanthropy has also risen to the challenge. This is not just Government's problem. This is our problem, and we all pay for the consequences of not addressing the problem through costs to our quality of life, our prisons, entitlements and ultimately our future.

It just makes good economic as well as good moral sense to support and prepare these young people.

A word of caution, however. Private investors will expect to see results or outcomes. They will expect a return on their investment. They will expect real data in real time, and they will expect policies to be driven by data. They will expect that the public side of the partnership is doing its job and is accountable for its responsibilities.

Data results and spending the taxpayers' dollars wisely, especially on established effective programs, is in our best interest here in Washington and at home.

We must have clear and measurable outcomes for the services and funding provided, and everyone must be held accountable to those measures.

The Foster Care Independence Act mandatory data collection and performance assessment requirements must be a priority.

It is clear that educational achievement is one of the most reliable predictors of future economic success. If you do not finish high school, you do not go to college, you do not go to technical school, and without that base, your earning potential is severely compromises.

We know that without a high school diploma, foster youth have limited access to Chafee and ETV or waivers that allow them free tuition to a State school in Florida. We also know there is an intricate web of factors that influence these poor educational outcomes, stability, permanent families, and transportation are a few.

When we asked a group of young people at Connected by 25 in Tampa how to make a dent in their high school attendance and completion rates, which were ten times worse than the normal young person in that county, they were able to provide solutions.

Give us one guidance counselor who understands the issues of foster care and who will be there for us no matter which school we are attending. If we have dropped out of school, give us a place where we can get individual tutoring, work at our own pace, open end hours that accommodate our work schedules and on the bus lines.

The child welfare and the education systems listened and saw a 200-percent increase in school attendance, graduation, and enrollment in post-secondary education in 1 year. They learned that $50,000 privately funded for the first year for a dedicated guidance counselor is a modest investment for such great outcomes, and have since embedded the position in their system and expanded the strategy to middle school.

However, we need more aggressive and flexible support for post-secondary education. Youth who age out of foster care need to support themselves and attend school. They should ensure that the use of Chafee and vouchers support part time employment and part time school attendance more strongly.

Safe and affordable housing, we have already talked about, and has been clearly identified as an issue. There are barriers and rules that preclude access to safe and affordable housing options.

We can identify youth aging out of foster care as a designated special population eligible for all Federal housing programs, Section 8. We can change the definition of "homelessness" to include foster care youth on discharge from legal custody. We can remove all language that prohibits full and part time school attendance if aged out of foster care.

We can increase the cap on Chafee funds for housing and increase the amount of ETV for postsecondary students, and then we can make sure that eligibility criteria is in language that young people can understand because they are really sometimes the only ones who are advocating for themselves.

We need to listen to the young people who tell us willingly and publicly their stories and to help explain the solutions that we need. They are our best hope for solutions.

Thank you very much for this opportunity. I would be happy to answer questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Soltis follows:]

Prepared Statement of Jane Soltis, Program Officer, Eckerd Family Foundation

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. It is my pleasure to be here today.

The Independent Living Services Advisory Council (ILSAC) is a legislatively mandated council of interested and committed volunteers in Florida that advises the Legislature as well as the Department of Children and Families on the status of independent living services in Florida. I am privileged to chair this Council.

The Eckerd Family Foundation, which I also represent, is a time-limited family foundation. Founded by Mr. Jack Eckerd and his wife Ruth Eckerd it is committed to improving the lives of vulnerable and disconnected young people so that they may become successful adults. Eckerd Family Foundation has invested more than $20 million over the last 8 years in Florida, North Carolina and Delaware to enhance foster care, juvenile justice and education programs.

While there are a number of issues related to youth aging out of foster care, I will focus my testimony on public-private partnerships, the need for data and outcomes, education and housing. My esteemed colleagues Gary Stangler and Mark Courtney can speak more articulately about some of the other strategies that we all concur are key to changing the outcomes for these youth.

Youth aging out of foster care is one of the Eckerd Family Foundation's primary priorities and we have piloted a successful set of strategies, "Connected by 25," in Hillsborough County, Florida and are replicating that project in 2 other counties of Florida with our partners Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Lumina Foundation for Education and countless other individuals, civic and private funders.

The strategies of Connected by 25 include:

- Advocating and supporting educational achievement
- Facilitating and creating access to workforce development opportunities
- Providing financial literacy education
- Encouraging savings and asset accumulation
- Creating entrepreneurship opportunities
- Accessing safe, stable and affordable housing
- Ensuring that no child leaves our system without a permanent connection or "family"

The Stuart and Walter S. Johnson Foundations, private funders in California, are implementing the same set of strategies in that state.

I want to emphasize that this investment of private resources is not designed to replace government's essential responsibility for child welfare services to children in the care and custody of the state, but rather to enhance independent living services so that the outcomes for these youth are improved. These children like any others in our country have the skills, abilities and heart to be great citizens in our communities. They must be given the guidance and support that allows them to flourish.

As Chairman McDermott so aptly stated, "as the de facto parents of foster children we should do no less." In our Connected by 25 sites, we have quickly learned that the majority of citizens believe that the government is taking care of preparing these young people with the supports, resources and skills necessary for economic self-sufficiency and success. When the ordinary citizen is educated about the reality of life for many of these young people, they have been quick to rise to the occasion. They see this as a manageable number of kids that we should be able to successfully help transition to adulthood and that these young people are "our children." That we should do no less for them than we do for our own children. As a result of that public awareness campaign, we have seen unprecedented public-private partnerships with our community-based child welfare system. Organizations such as the Rotary, Kiwanis, United Way, Junior Leagues, 100 Black Men, the Bar Association and faith-based communities have come forward to partner in this effort. The private philanthropic community has also risen to the challenge. This is as it should be. This is not just government's problem . . . this is our problem and we pay for the consequences of not addressing the problem through the cost to our quality of life, our prisons, entitlements and ultimately our future. It just makes good economic as well as good moral sense to support and prepare these young people. This sort of public-private partnership is one that needs to be encouraged and supported. The child welfare system is not equipped to do this alone. Our collective challenge is to stimulate more of these partnerships, invite others to the table and consider incentives to ensure that they have a meaningful seat at that table. It is also clear that youth must have a central seat at the table and are viewed not as the problem but experts in solution building.

A word of caution however. Private investors will expect to see results or outcomes. They will expect a return on their investments. They expect real data in real time. They will expect policy to be driven by data. They expect that the public side of the equation or partnership is doing its job and is accountable for its responsibilities. As the background information on this hearing states, "the impact on the outcomes for former foster youth is still uncertain because an assessment and data collection system for the program has yet to be established in final form by the Dept. of Health and Human Services." At this time it appears that May 2008 is the target date for the first collection of data.

States like Florida, Michigan and California, have taken the initiative to address this unconscionable lack of accountability for the public dollars they disburse. While there is no state that has found the magic software or reporting system that captures everything we want or need to know, those that are working to base their decision on sound data and evidence of what works should be commended for their efforts. The recent National Governors Association Institute for Best Practices Policy Academy on youth transitioning out of foster care served to highlight this issue.

Data and the collection and analyzing of outcomes should be driving each state in the development and implementation of policy and practice about what is working to change the results for these young people. Mark Courtney and his work at Chapin Hall, Gary Stangler and the work of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative in their Opportunity Passport and our own Connected by 25 sites in Florida and California, and programs in other states, clearly demonstrate some workable solutions. We need to cease putting dollars in programs that have proven they do not work despite their best intentions, begin holding public and private providers and our courts accountable for what we know works and change the tides here. But as any private investor will tell you, we need real data in real time and measurable results on which to base those decisions. The Eckerd Family Foundation has re-

cently commissioned *Child Trends* to provide us and the policymakers of the state of Florida the data on the numbers of the disconnected youth in our state so that we have an accurate database on which to craft system solutions.

Establishing and finalizing the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, mandatory data collection and performance assessments requirements for states should be a priority of the Congress, the Administration and the Deptment of Health and Human Services. We must have clear and measurable outcomes for the services and funding provided and states as well as communities and providers need to be accountable to those measures.

Economic success depends on education and we need to set our expectations and sights as high for these young people as we do for our own children.

It is very clear that educational achievement is one of the most reliable predictors of future economic self-sufficiency. If you cannot finish high school, you cannot get into college or vocational/technical training. Without that base, your earning potential is severely compromised. Most foster youth do not have the ability to hold part-time jobs before they turn 18 and age out. Our licensing requirements are an obstacle for foster families and group homes in this regard, and we know that youth who work part time are much more likely to graduate from high school, develop good work skills and ethics and are more likely to acquire and maintain employment as adults.

We also know that without a high school diploma, foster youth have limited access to Chaffee and Educational and Training Vouchers. They cannot utilize the waivers that allow them free tuition to a state school in Florida. We know that youth aging out of foster care have poor high school graduation rates. We also know that there is an intricate web of factors that influence these poor outcomes including safety, stability, permanency, transportation and the ability to attend their "home" school. These factors cross the systems of child welfare, education, transportation and workforce. When we asked a group of young people at Connected by 25 in Tampa, Florida how to make a dent in their high school attendance and completion rates which were 10 times worse than the normal young person in the county, they were able to provide a solution. *Give us one guidance counselor who understands the issues of foster care and will be there for us no matter which school we are attending. If we have dropped out, give us a place where we can get individual tutoring, work at our own pace, which is open at hours that accommodate our working schedules and is on the bus line.*

The child welfare and education systems listened and saw a 200% increase in school attendance, graduation and enrollment in postsecondary education in one year. The child welfare system and the school system have learned through this privately funded pilot idea that $50,000 for a dedicated guidance counselor/educational advocate is a modest investment for such great outcomes and have since embedded the position in their system and have expanded the strategy to middle school.

However, we need more aggressive and flexible support for post secondary education.

Youth who age out of foster care need to support themselves economically and attend school. States should ensure that the use of Chaffee and Educational Training Vouchers support part-time employment and part-time school attendance more strongly.

Safe and affordable housing continues to be a primary issue for many of the youth. Most are forced to leave their foster home or group home placements on their 18th birthday.

Can you imagine your child worrying about where they will sleep at 18 years of age? We know in Florida that 40% of former foster youth experience homelessness within 18 months of leaving foster care. And we know that without housing, former foster care youth cannot access education, employment or training services.

While federal funding from the Foster Care Independence Act has given us the ability to wrap our hands around many of the services required for this population, there are barriers and rules that are forcing many of our youth to slip through our fingers.

The reality is that most of the 18 year olds we are talking about are in 11th and 12th grade in high school. As you know, most youth from intact families can expect ongoing support well into their early twenties; however, for foster care youth the legal obligation for continued services ends at age 18.

Our work is not about entitlement, but investment in our foster youth. It is our call to action to create a continuum of care services on the federal, state and community level. As part of this call to action, we are requiring safe, affordable and stable housing options.

We can remove barriers by advertising and informing on every level of the eligibility of foster care youth for these programs. Communicating eligibility criteria in

language a young person can understand, because often they are the only ones advocating for themselves—the only ones trying to find a way for themselves.

Together we can identify youth aging out of foster care as a "designated special population" eligible for all federal housing programs.

- Section 8: Foster Youth will be eligible for Section 8 housing immediately upon discharge from foster care, even if the youth is single and a full-time student. Eligibility will continue as long as the youth is eligible to receive Chaffee funds and/or Educational and Training Vouchers (ETV).
- The definition of "homeless" for all federal programs should include—foster care youth **upon their discharge date from legal custody**.
- For all federally funded housing programs: Remove all language that prohibits full and/or part-time school attendance if the youth aged out of foster care—legal custody of the state at the age of emancipation.
- Increasing the cap on Chaffee funds for housing: Currently no more than 30% can be used on Room and Board—Increase that amount to 50% for youth still in high school or obtaining their GED.
- Increase the amount of ETV for postsecondary students from $5,000 to $7,500.

Youth across the nation who have aged out of care, through California Youth Connection, Foster Care Alumni Assn, or our own Florida Youth Shine, have demonstrated a willingness to volunteer, to give back and help fix the problems for those younger. They willingly publicly tell their stories in an effort to help explain the solutions needed. Their resilience and caring in the face of all that has befallen them should serve as an inspiration. We ask you to expand provisions empowering the youth and supporting them in becoming their own best advocates, for their futures and for the success of those who come after them.

Thank you very much for this opportunity. This concludes my testimony and I would be happy to answer questions.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Thank you. Thank all of you for your testimony.

One of the interesting things that I picked up from listening to this is this whole question of permanency and how you deal with that. I would like to hear first of all if any of you have any knowledge about a State that is doing the best job in all the factors around this issue of aging out, what State it is and what kind of things they have in place.

Also, your ideas about if a kid is 15 or 16 and is out of control, as one of these young men suggested, it is hard to adopt. Older kids are hard to adopt. Everybody knows that. The statistics are very clear.

Adoption may not be the issue. Perhaps a court appointed guardian ad litem forever. What is the mechanism by which you tie a kid to somebody? Some of them found voluntary ones. Some found family members. What are the mechanisms or what are the programs people are using to try to give that connection. Is it just the program itself that you are tied to, such as the Jim Casey Foundation or to the Eckerd Foundation, so you go back to whoever your contact was there?

I would like to hear the best practice States and then whatever you think about this whole business of giving kids permanency.

Dr. COURTNEY. Mr. Chairman, two things. One is I do not think any State is doing the best at all of these things in terms of permanency and preparing kids for adulthood.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Give me the range. Give me the ones that are doing good in this and the ones that are doing good in that.

Mr. STANGLER. I would say the State that is doing very well in permanence, including identifying family members and using things like family finders and team decisionmaking, et cetera, Michigan and Iowa would be two States I would put up there in that regard.

In terms of preparation for adulthood, many of the things I have talked about, in terms of economic success, I would look at Colorado. I would look at Florida. Those would be the States. Connecticut. Those would be the States that I think are doing a good job. Maine has greatly lowered the number of kids in foster care by finding permanent families along the lines you have talked about. Oklahoma is co-locating child welfare and child support enforcement staff to identify families for these kids.

There are a number of innovations going on. Those are the ones I would throw out.

Ms. SOLTIS. I will just add that often times there are adults in communities who hear about this, who get educated about these issues, and they may not have the capability of adopting, but they certainly may be interested in becoming guardians, being that support, being connected to them.

They cannot sometimes financially afford to send another young person to college and unfortunately, our laws in the past have dictated that if you are adopted, then you sometimes do not qualify for some of the educational vouchers that we have made available, so you have to choose between adoption or the tuition assistance.

There are people who are willing to become guardians and become that person, that permanent connection. I think we need to support and provide incentives for that as well.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Is that in a legal way?

Ms. SOLTIS. It can be.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. A guardian? It could be court appointed?

Ms. SOLTIS. It could be court appointed. Often times if you talk to the young people, they can tell you the important people in their life. It might be a coach. It might be a friend's mother. It might be a whole series of people. It is not the traditional foster family that we think about.

Mr. COBBS. Mr. Chairman, I would also like to respond and just tell you a little bit about a pilot program that we are running for the State of California, where we are really trying to attack this issue of permanency for those young people who are 18 and transitioning out of the foster care system.

Very simply what we have done is we have asked them who is that permanent connection. We ask the question if you were in trouble, if you needed someone to call, if you were sick and you needed someone to bring you soup over to your house, who would that person be.

They come up with answers. We go to that person and ask would you be willing to allow this young person who is transitioning to stay in your household, and we will help facilitate that relationship, work out the rules of that relationship.

We have had some success. What we found is that the only reason these community supporters will not step up is because they have not been asked to step up.

We do not recruit people, special appointments. We go to the young people and say who are these people. We have not been turned down when we have gone to coaches and community leaders and people in churches and things like that that the youth have also identified.

Dr. COURTNEY. I guess I would like to maybe reframe your question in the following way. I think the question for me is how do we get States to do all these wonderful things that people are talking about. Why do we think States would actually do these things if they are no longer legally responsible for these young people.

Which is what happens when we say they age out at 18. That is really what we are talking about. We are saying the State child welfare agency is no longer legally responsible for the care and supervision of that young person.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Let me just stop you there. Mr. Stark asked a question of me, the answer to which I did not know. What did we do when adulthood was 21? Did we age out at 18 then or did we take them all the way to 21?

Part of bringing down adulthood to 18 was we aged them out quicker.

Dr. COURTNEY. I think that is right. It was a long time ago, but I think that is right.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Is that correct?

Dr. COURTNEY. That predated—the Federal child welfare program really grew out of the welfare program before 1980. It was not as clearly legislated as it was after 1980. Yes, that is basically what happened.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. At 18, we really dumped kids. We gave them the vote and we said they could go to war and they could be on their own when they were 18.

Dr. COURTNEY. We abdicated our responsibility as parents. That is right. Essentially, legally, what we do is we say we are going to remove you from your home—it was interesting. You have taken us from our home. We did not really want that, so do not abandon us. That is essentially what we do. We take on the parental role and unlike any parent these days, we essentially end that at 18.

I think the challenge for the handful of jurisdictions that do maintain and allow young people to make the choice to stay in care—Illinois being the most obvious one, but the District of Columbia does that. Puerto Rico does that.

There are a handful of jurisdictions that do it. They have had to struggle with what does it mean for us to be a parent after 18, between 18 and 21. It is different, obviously.

Permanency, you do not want to give up on permanency, but you have more young people for whom it is less likely but still possible.

The courts are involved. This was driven in Illinois by the courts. The courts basically found themselves in a position where the statute allowed them to ask the child welfare agency, "wait a minute, you are coming here and telling me you are going to discharge this young person, they have no money to their name, they have not graduated high school, they have a mental health problem, and you

are asking me to say we are not going to be their parent any more."

The courts over time basically refused to do that. What has happened over the last 15 to 17 years is the State has become a parent.

I guess I would just frame that question. I think it is a crucial policy question. It is very difficult for me to see how just kind of tweaking a program that gives money to States without actually building some accountability in, and re-thinking the notion that we going to parent them after age 18, what that really will accomplish. It allows the States—it gives them some money. They may or may not do something.

I think there are some interesting things going on out there but somebody in the room, I will not mention his name, actually said, who was a former child welfare administrator if I am not legally responsible for them, they are pretty low on my list of priorities, compared to all the kids under 18 who I have to care for.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Mr. Weller? I have gone beyond my point.

Ms. ASHBY. I cannot help you in terms of a specific State. I think these individuals are correct. There probably is no one State that has all the answers.

What I wanted to say was it seems to me the issue is the supports that are in place to help the youth themselves and to help the families that have the youth in their households as they turn 16/17 years old, prior to aging out. Even if the age were raised to 21, would we not have the same issues, but 3 years later?

What is needed for all young people, and I have a 25 year old son who I am still talking to and telling him what he should be doing, what people need are various types of support. Certainly, young people who are in the situations of the young people we heard earlier need a number of different types of services.

Whether or not this means more money, I do not know. What we need to do is be able to assess the situation in terms of what services are available. Speaking just for the Federal Government, there are lots of services offered in terms of housing and substance abuse services and health services, but the issue seems to be how does an individual get access to those.

How do you know about them in the first place.

The young lady who was here earlier said she was in her second year of college before she found out about the education and training vouchers. That should not be.

Her guidance counselors in high school or her social worker when she was in care should have told her. We would not expect for her to know enough to seek out that information. There were a number of individuals who should have been in her life that could have told her about that.

We have services available but people do not know about them. We do not know whether we have enough because no one has really evaluated the services that are there.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. I am going to stop and let Mr. Weller have 10 minutes.

Mr. WELLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As the one who controls the gavel, you certainly have all the time you wish, particu-

larly since there are only two of us here. I appreciate your generosity.

I also want to thank our panel for your patience and what I thought was wonderful testimony by the young people this morning. Of course, being interrupted by the vote.

I appreciate your patience and those who stayed in the audience as well in attending.

Ms. Soltis, you had talked about the challenges and benefits of foster kids in finishing high school, getting a high school degree. What are the challenges that you see in the ability of these young people to be able to finish high school?

The young man from Illinois said he had gone to eight different schools by the time he finished high school.

What are the challenges?

Ms. SOLTIS. For some people, eight is not a lot, let me tell you. There are young people who will tell you they have been to 30 and 40 schools in their time in foster care.

Mr. WELLER. I have been told it takes a child about 6 months to get acclimated if that is an accurate figure.

Ms. SOLTIS. In many places, we still have a situation where a young person changes placement and then they have to change their school. The school may be on a different kind of schedule, they have different expectations, they have different kinds of blocks versus scheduled times for classes.

Every time they move, that becomes an issue. We have heard many times from young people in foster care that when they change a school, their records do not necessarily always go with them. Their birth certificates, their health certificates, their Social Security cards, all of that information, and often times that precludes them from starting right up in that school system.

Transportation is sometimes an issue. If they want to stay in the school they are in, getting there is certainly sometimes not a possibility.

The McKinney/Vanto Act allows kids who are in homeless shelters to hopefully stay in the same schools that they are in when they become homeless. That is not the case for kids in foster care. That could be changed very easily.

Mr. WELLER. How can we change it? I have seen as we have seen, regardless of demographic background, that young people or any citizen of our country who has a high school diploma has a much better opportunity for life as well as economic advancement.

Specifically, what changes would you suggest?

Ms. SOLTIS. I think the example of Connected by 25 where no matter what high school that young person in foster care was in, we know who those young people in foster care are, no matter what high school they were in, they had one guidance counselor who made sure their records transferred. Sometimes it was really just going to the systems and saying this young person is really attached in this school, part of clubs, let us find a way to keep them, maybe getting bus transportation, to let them stay in their own schools.

If they are staying in their own schools, then they are more likely to finish.

Mr. WELLER. Mr. Cobbs, do you agree with that assessment about if they stay in the same school, the more likely they are to finish and do better? Is that your perspective as well?

Mr. COBBS. Yes, that is my perspective as well. We actually have a portion of our program at First Place that does exactly what they are doing in Florida, where we assign a social worker, not within the school system, but to follow that young person.

We have had tremendous success from that program.

Mr. WELLER. What type of initiative would you suggest that we in Congress should consider that would help or allow that child to stay in the same school, where they have friends and involvement in clubs and involvement in communities and have peers and mentors that they have developed relationships with?

What specific recommendation would you make?

Mr. COBBS. I think some specific recommendations that I would make would be to go a little bit deeper. I think starting with allowing young people and requiring that they have the ability to stay in the same school. Sometimes when it is legislation enacted or that is a policy, then people will follow that.

I also think, she mentioned the moving around and how young people move. In the State of California, the average foster care kid moves nine times. If it is just nine times, that is probably nine different schools.

What happens is even though in California it is part of the legislation that says this young person can go to school, but if you move 50 miles, you may be in the same county, but if you move 50 miles from where your old school is, then I do not care how many bus transportation vouchers they gave you, eventually that transportation back and forth to school is going to be burdensome for you.

I think placing young people who are in foster care in their communities and working hard on permanency and keeping them where they are placed at, then we will begin to see some better outcomes toward education. If they are in the same communities, they are going to be going to the same schools. That is the way that I would begin to kind of approach that issue.

Mr. WELLER. Others on the panel, do you agree it is in the best interest of the child to find ways to keep them in the same school system?

Mr. STANGLER. I would say it is important to try to keep them in the same school system, but the underlying issue is the real problem. Even if you are in the same school, if you are moved to eight different sets of strangers in that area, your schooling is going to suffer regardless.

I think my recommendation would be we have to address the permanency issue to stop the moving around to really change the outcomes.

Dr. COURTNEY. I think an elegant solution would be to have HHS actually implement the well-being parts of the Adoption and Safe Families Act 1997 (P.L. 105–89)—remember, they set up outcomes for permanency and safety and they have yet to promulgate any with respect to well-being, the most obvious well-being outcome, along with health perhaps, would be some measures around education.

It seems to me as a nation we should know whether kids in foster care are attending school, whether they are moving, there are some simple outcome measures you could ask States to track. We are not doing that. If you do that, then they know what they need to do in order to get kids educated, but they are not held accountable for the basic outcomes.

Mr. WELLER. Not necessarily creating a new program, they just need to implement the one they have already been directed to create.

Dr. COURTNEY. Exactly.

Mr. WELLER. Do you agree with that, Ms. Ashby?

Ms. ASHBY. That is what I was going to say. Part of the Foster Care Independence Act was a data system that would record services to children, outcomes, characteristics of youth aging out, and that has yet to be implemented.

HHS still has not put forth any regulations, for example, to collect data from States. Several States have data. There is no mechanism for that data being populated into the data system that was envisioned and actually mandated by the law.

Dr. COURTNEY. The irony of my study is it came from those three States wanting to get ahead of the curve back in 2000 to sort of pilot really how States would collect data.

A number of States, Michigan, for example, were going to participate but waited because they wanted to see what the Federal Government was going to put out in terms of regulations. They are still waiting.

Implement the law that is there and we would get a long way.

Mr. WELLER. Congress' job on oversight, is it not, Mr. Chairman? I have another question I want to ask Ms. Soltis.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. You are suggesting another hearing.

Mr. WELLER. I know you like hearings. I do, too, Mr. Chairman. [Laughter.]

As we look at hearings, we may want to look at strategies to keep kids in school and give them the opportunity to stay within the same school system if they can, recognizing there is a geographic issue. To me, that would be a worthwhile hearing.

Ms. Soltis, we discussed earlier and Mr. McDermott raised the issue of the idea that many have advocated today about extending foster care to the age of 21, beyond the age of 18. My State is one of those which already does it.

Every State and union currently has the option today, do they not, to provide or give children the opportunity to stay within the foster system until age 21; is that correct?

Ms. SOLTIS. I believe they have the option. There are very few that—I am not sure how many do. I am not sure that often times young people are aware that they can do that. It is a difficult issue when someone is 18.

Gary, you might be able to talk more articulately about which States allow that.

Mr. WELLER. I think there are 17, that I was told, that currently have implemented programs where it is very clear you can stay within the foster care system until age 21; is that correct?

Mr. STANGLER. I do not know the exact number, Mr. Weller. I would say it is a handful. I would say fewer than I can count on my hand that actually do a good job of extending that option.

The States are all over the place on this. You have the court issues involved in terms of does the State law allow the court to retain jurisdiction after age 18.

It is a more complicated answer than I could probably give you off the top of my head.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. I think the fact is that there is no Federal money for them to grant but there is the option to use Medicaid, which is partially Federal money. I think the States have that option. Is that a correct analysis of it?

Ms. ASHBY. That is correct. That is the 17 States you mentioned. Seventeen have adopted what is known as the Chafee option for Medicaid. Five others, as we understand it, are planning to do that, and there may be one within the last week or so that has done so.

As I understand it, the State legislatures have to meet in the other five States to finalize this. The remaining 28 States have other options, such as SCHIP or something else where these youth can get medical services.

Mr. WELLER. The Chairman has been generous with the time for me. Let me just ask in very simple terms, could each of you just tell me why have the States not exercised, those who do not allow foster care until age 21, why have they not exercised the option when they clearly have the authority today? In simple terms.

Mr. COBBS. Money. The Federal Government shares all the way up to age 18 and then stops. I would say that is the biggest thing. As Mark pointed out, the fact that they have no legal responsibility past age 18. It is hard to make a case for why you should spend money.

Dr. COURTNEY. They go hand in hand. You do not get Federal reimbursement unless the court has jurisdiction, except for short voluntary placements.

They are tied in Federal law right now up to age 18. After 18, you cannot get Federal reimbursement. You can actually look at the history. A number of States that used to have statutes that allowed young people to stay in care until 21 actually moved them back when the Federal reimbursement stopped, so their legal jurisdiction ends at 18.

You need both. Some States did it voluntarily. That is what Illinois did. Illinois law allows it, and the courts weigh in and decide whether it is in the best interest of the youth.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Give us the explanation for how it happened in Illinois. Somebody brought a lawsuit. Who was it, on whose behalf, and what agency? How did it happen?

Dr. COURTNEY. My understanding—I used to think that, too. Illinois has done this for a long time, way back to the 19eighties. My understanding is the statute was not definitive with respect to when. There was no end date. The statute says "with just cause," you could keep kids in care after 18 through 21, and the question was what is "just cause."

What happened over time was an evolution toward the best interest standard. In other words, you cannot kick somebody out if it is clearly not in their interest and they want to remain in care.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Who brought the suit? Did the State?

Dr. COURTNEY. I do not know there was a specific lawsuit. I think the statute was there and over time, the courts became more active. The Department used to go and say we want to discharge this young person and the courts would say okay. In Cook County, the Public Guardian's Office, which is the defender of the kids, all the kids have attorneys, started to go to court and say wait a minute, make a case for this. Why do you want to discharge this person, they are going to be homeless tomorrow if you discharge them.

The judges started acting within the statute in keeping young people in care. It is still the case in Cook County, it is 85 percent of young people in care at 17.5 are still in care at 19.5. Downstate, it is more like half and half. Half and half is still far in excess of anywhere else in the country.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. It is on the State buck or the county buck?

Dr. COURTNEY. It is a State run system, so the State is paying for all of that.

Mr. WELLER. You have to be a little sensitive to too much litigation. Catholic Charities used to provide foster care services in Cook County. They folded their tent and left that. They were one of the largest providers and was a loss as a result of litigation.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Can I ask finally the question that is laying here on the table without an answer, why has HHS not implemented this piece of legislation?

You people are part of the system. You must at least be able to give me a guess. I am Irish and I was raised in Chicago. I have an idea. Tell me what is your best guess?

It is simply no interest or if we found out the data, we would then have to do something about it?

Ms. ASHBY. I have done several studies, as you know, involving child welfare.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. You chuckle to yourself when you see the new letter coming over from Congress saying would you please look at the foster care system. You have done it enough times. They see you coming.

Ms. ASHBY. We have made numerous recommendations. The result, I will have to say, the result is usually the same. I am hesitating here because this is not a GAO answer. It is not a GAO answer.

In order to get things done, you have to have people that care, and the whole idea of people in States who will not do things to help young people because they are not required to, well, these are not the people who should be in those positions.

At HHS, the people I have worked with in child welfare, they just do not seem to be very proactive in terms of feeling they have much, if any, responsibility. It is a State issue, they will tell you. They do not want to burden the States. That is quite often their answer. Or they just allow the slow——

Chairman MCDERMOTT. Gathering data is burdensome?

Ms. ASHBY. If they require the States to do certain things in order to collect the data and collect it in certain ways that are consistent across the States.

They sort of allow these slow mechanisms of bureaucracy to not work and years go by.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. The Congress changes and the Chairmen change, and the appropriators change, and it never happens. These kids are really forgotten, is what you are saying. They know they are like school administrators who know this class is going to be gone at graduation and we will have another bunch. They will be gone shortly. That is basically what you are saying.

Ms. ASHBY. That is part of what I am saying, but at the same time, it is hard for me having sat here this morning and hearing the stories of these young people and having gone out to States on site visits and met with people involved in the child welfare system to believe most people, if they really understood the situation, understood the issues, (and there were some people that were being hurt, because these children are innocent) that they would not do all they could to make things better.

Maybe the people in Washington at HHS need to get out in the field and see what is going on. I do not know.

Chairman MCDERMOTT. I want to thank all of you for coming and staying through the break. Although there are two Members here, this is an issue that many Members are concerned with. We are working on Iraq over on the Floor. It is a little bit of an explanation why people are not here, but I want to thank you for giving us some ideas.

I want to ask one other question. How many people in the audience are foster kids or were foster kids once?

[Show of hands.]

We have a few. I would hope that you would as you watch feel free to talk to us about what kinds of things you have ideas about, how we might change this.

I realize sitting here, I did a lot of this. I did child dependency questions in courts and I did decisions in divorces, who should get the kids and all that kind of stuff.

I did it, but when you are on the ground doing it day to day a lot more about it than you do when you sort of drift away up to some other level.

You can be very useful to us by giving us information. I hope that you will not consider the 15 minutes you spent talking here as being the sole contribution you can make to this.

Thank you all for coming.

[Whereupon, at 1:37 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

[Submissions for the Record follow:]

Statement of Child Welfare League of America, Arlington, Virginia

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), representing public and private nonprofit, child-serving member agencies across the country, is pleased to submit testimony to the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support. CWLA commends the Subcommittee and its members for focusing on the issue of youth transitioning out of foster care to adulthood. We appreciate the Subcommittee's continued focus on youth. This hearing is an important follow up a to your hearing on June 19, on disconnected and disadvantaged youth.

Many issues confront young people as they transition from foster care to adulthood. Aside from the challenge of becoming independent, they face higher levels of unemployment, no health insurance, substance abuse and homelessness and many other serious obstacles. These young people leave care not because they have been reunified with their families, have been adopted, or found another form of permanency, but simply because there is an age limit on federal funding.

Youths Leaving Foster Care Due To Age

Certainly there is no group of America's youth more deserving of Congress' attention than those in foster care or those who leave foster care after turning age 18. Every year 20,000–25,000 young people exit the foster care system.[1] These young people leave care simply because there is an age limit on federal funding. While some states may extend this support beyond age eighteen and the Chaffee Independent Living Program offers limited funding for transitional services to these young people, all too often the end result is that foster children find themselves on their own at age eighteen.

Barriers to a Secure Adulthood

Adolescents constitute a major segment of the youngsters the child welfare system serves. In 2005, 29 percent of children in care were 15 years of age or older.[2] Most youth enter out-of-home care as a result of abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Others have run away from home or have no homes. Young people transitioning out of the foster care system are significantly affected by the instability that accompanies long periods of out-of-home placement during childhood and adolescence. These young people often find themselves truly "on their own," with few, if any, financial resources, no place to live, and little or no support from family, friends, and community. The experiences of these youth place them at higher risk for unemployment, poor educational outcomes, health issues, early parenthood, long-term dependency on public assistance, increased rates of incarceration, and homelessness. The resulting harm to the youth themselves, their communities, and the society at large is unacceptably high.

Housing Needs

Young people aging out of the foster care system need economic security and affordable, safe and stable housing. The 2000 Census reported that nearly 4 million people between the ages of 25 and 34 live with their parents due to economic realities—jobs are scarce and housing is expensive. This phenomenon has been identified as "adultolescence", an extended period of adolescence during which it is has become common and expected for young people to live with their parents. Unfortunately, youth in foster care do not always have the option of turning to their families for financial support. Former foster youth are often prematurely confronted with the harsh reality of the gap between the wages they earn and the cost of housing. As a result, young people aging out of the foster care system are becoming homeless at disconcerting rates.

Twenty-five percent of foster youth stated they have experienced homelessness at

[1] Children who aged out of foster care are captured by the AFCARS emancipation data element. Children who exit care to emancipation are those who reached the age of majority; CWLA, Special tabulation from AFCARS.

least one night within 2.5 to 4 years after exiting foster care.[3] In fact, three in ten of the nation's homeless adults report foster care history.[4]

Education Needs

Similarly, the correlation between out-of-home care and low academic performance has been documented nationwide. For children in foster care, schools should offer an opportunity at continued stability while most of that child's life is being turn inside out. In addition to the abuse and neglect they experience, these children must deal with the consequences of being removed from their homes and communities. This often times includes separation from siblings and may include making several moves from home to home. For these children and youth their lives now include dealing with a child welfare agency and court system.

Schools should be safe havens for children during times of transition and instability, but poor coordination and communication between schools, agencies and other parties may result in added instability and at times, no school at all. With no federal law to ensure school stability and access to supportive services for children in foster care there is often as much movement among schools as there is in living arrangements.

There are many challenges for these children. A child who moves to a different home may all of a sudden find they are now in a new school district. This all too often means they must wait for a transfer of school records before a new school allows them to continue their education. In some instances, a child may have to wait for a transfer of medical records to document they meet any health care requirements such as immunizations. All of these barriers mean a delay in meeting their education needs, and these foster children are being left behind not just in education, but in the stability they vitally need. These children and youth not surprisingly fall behind academically, cognitively, and socially. They often need to repeat courses and are unable to access the support services that could improve education outcomes.

Although all children are entitled to education services under federal, state, and local laws, the specific educational needs of children and youth in care often go unmet. The rate at which foster youth complete high school (50%) is significantly below the rate at which their peers complete high school (70%). The rate at which college-qualified foster youth attend postsecondary education (20%) is substantially below the rate at which their peers attend postsecondary education (60%).[5] However, it is important to note that 70% of former foster youth express the desire to attend college.[6] The impact on future earnings is enormous. The census Bureau reports college graduates make $24,000 more per year than those with high school diplomas.[7]

Health Needs

In addition, for young people leaving foster care, lack of health care poses a substantial challenge. According to a recent study, approximately twenty-five percent of foster care alumni or adults who had experienced foster care later experienced post traumatic stress. The general population by comparison experienced post traumatic stress at a rate of four percent.[8] Earlier this year at a briefing conducted by CWLA and sponsored by the Subcommittee Chair, Representative Jim McDermott, Dr. David Rubin, MD, MSCE, Director of Research and Policy, Safe Place, Center for Child Protection and Health Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, indicated that only half of children with behavioral problems in foster care receive services, up to

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[3] Cook, R. (1991). A national evaluation of Title IV–E foster care independent living programs for youth, phase 2. Rockville, MD: Westat.

[4] Roman, N.P., & Wolfe, N. (1995) Web of failure: The relationship between foster care and homelessness. National Alliance to End Homelessness.

[5] Wolanin, T. (2005). *Higher education opportunities for foster youth: A primer for policymakers*. Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy.

[6] McMillen, C., Auslander, W., Elze, D., White, T. & Thompson, R. (2003). Educational experiences and aspirations of older youth in foster care. *Child Welfare*, 82, 475–495.

[7] Census Bureau *data underscore value of college*. (October 2006). Available online at http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/education/007660.html. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

[8] Pecora, P.J., Kessler, R.C., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A. C., English, D., White, J., Hiripi, E., White, C. R., Wiggins, T., & Holmes, K. (2005). Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study. Available online at http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/NorthwestAlumniStudy.htm. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.

one-third of children failed to receive appropriate immunizations, and one in eight were not receiving preventive care.[9]

The Chafee program allows states to extend Medicaid coverage to former foster children between ages 18 and 21. Despite Medicaid's tremendous advantage for youth in foster care, only 17 states had implemented the extension as of December 2006.

Given the high rates of physical and mental health problems extensively documented among children and youth in foster care, access to health services is a critical factor as young people transition to adulthood. Because most children and youth in foster care are covered by Medicaid, use of the expansion option would allow a state to readily facilitate the transfer of a youth's Medicaid eligibility from one category to another without any gap in coverage as they exit foster care. Medicaid coverage should continue for all youth in foster care until at least age 21.

Keeping medical records up to date and accessible is another challenge for young people involved with child welfare. Advances have been made in electronic record keeping, but more are needed.

Legislative Recommendations

Support Through Age Twenty-One

The 110th Congress has an opportunity to make significant progress in improving the lives and outcomes for this segment of disconnected and disadvantaged youth. Senator Barbara Boxer (D–CA) introduced the Foster Care Continuing Opportunities Act, S. 1512. This legislation would simply amend the current law that defines foster children to age eighteen. States would have an option to extend this to age twenty-one. This extension would allow these youth more time to appropriately prepare for transitioning to adulthood. It is imperative that youth work in partnership with their caseworker to create an effective plan for transitioning out of foster care. An effective transition plan focuses on the development of independent living skills, including securing housing, developing a financial plan, obtaining and maintaining employment, continuing education, and creating social networks and connections.

In an effort to close the gaps that allow so many youth to fall through the cracks, it is necessary to have effective collaboration and coordination. Creating connections, developing effective transition plans and integrating services will prevent the intersection of foster care with homelessness, health issues, incarceration, unemployment, pregnancy and early parenthood. Instead, these partnerships along with a solid transition plan, will allow these resilient youth to become thriving, productive, and contributing members of society.

Support Independent Living

For youth transitioning out of foster care, expanding eligibility for critical support for independent living services will ensure a successful transition to independence and self-sufficiency, and reduce the numbers of young people who become homeless, unemployed, incarcerated, and/or at high risk of becoming victims and victimizers. To accomplish this improvement and expansion, funding for the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program needs to be increased significantly.

McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act/Education Reform

The reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act as part of the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act provides an opportunity to better address the needs of children and youth in foster care. McKinney-Vento provides access to essential federal education protections and rights for children and youth who are homeless. Children and youth who are eligible for McKinney-Vento have access to supports for school success that many children involved in child welfare lack: school stability or immediate enrollment if stability is not possible, school staff charged with ensuring their prompt enrollment, and more. While these protections currently apply to a subset of children involved in foster care, the current definition is not clear and states provide coverage differently and in a limited way for children in foster care. The reauthorization of McKinney-Vento provides an opportunity to ensure these protections are available to *all* children in foster care, with special accommodation for the needs and family dynamics that face children in foster care.

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[9] CWLA briefing, May 21, 2007. Sources: GAO, 1995; Burns et al. JAACAP, 2004; Rubin et al. Pediatrics 2004; Hurlburt et al. J Gen Psychiatry 2004; Harman et al. Arch Ped Adol Med 2000; Halfon et al. Pediatrics 1992 MD MSCE

Funding for Tuition Vouchers

The Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program provides assistance of up to $5,000 per year for the cost of attendance at an institution of higher education for youth who age out of foster care or are adopted after age 16. Funding for this program has never reached the amount requested by President Bush—$60 million—which itself is not enough to meet the need. The ETV program began receiving funds in 2003 and was set at $42 million, and has been increased slightly in subsequent years. The benefits of a college education are significant. Funding for the ETV program should be expanded to at least the level proposed by the President.

Further improvements to the ETV program are needed, including requiring technical assistance for states to make sure the funds are fully utilized. Also, it should be required that any ETV funds not used in one state be transferred to other states' ETV programs rather than being returned to the federal treasury.

Access To Health Care

The Medicaid Foster Care Coverage Act of 2007, H.R. 1376, has been introduced by Representative Dennis Cardoza (D–CA–18). This bill addresses a critical issue for young people leaving foster care, lack of health insurance. As stated previously, given the high rates of physical and mental health problems, access to health services is a critical factor as young people transition to adulthood. While some states have taken the option to extend Medicaid coverage to age 21, we agree with the growing number of advocates that the best way to assure this coverage is simply to require Medicaid coverage for these former foster youth.

Studies have revealed that when compared to the general population, in addition to severely lower rates of graduation from college and employment and higher instances of homelessness, foster care alumni experienced a disproportionate amount of both physical and mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder and major depression. Compounding this problem is the fact that 33% of foster care alumni lack health insurance—a rate almost twice as high as the general population.[10]

Current law does provide mechanisms by which to cover this vulnerable population with the support needed as they leave the care of the child welfare system. Some states, for example, have implemented the Chafee option to extend Medicaid to youth aging out through the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. Strides have been made, but because young people who age out of the system often lack financial resources and a place to live, and have little or no support from family, friends, and the community there is much more work to be done. By extending Medicaid coverage to former foster youth until the age of 21, we would be guaranteeing a critical piece of the equation that would help them make a successful transition to adulthood—comprehensive health care.

In addition, actions over the past several years have undercut the state's ability to use Targeted Case Management services (TCM). CWLA has great concerns about these actions and we feel it undercuts access to care to the entire child welfare population. This is not a cost saving issue, but is rather an issue of access to health care. We are also concerned about future regulatory action that may restrict state Medicaid systems use of rehabilitative services. We urge Congress to be vigilant and in fact to take action to stop any regulations that overreach and have the effect of restricting access to care by youth and all children in foster care.

Data Collection Needs

Congress should provide the resources necessary for the implementation of the National Youth in Transitions Database. This new initiative is a tremendous opportunity to provide valuable information that will inform future improvements in services to young people. The funds for this implementation should be a priority for Congress and should not come at the expense of existing services or supports or reduce services to adolescents receiving Chafee and ETV funding.

Support for Kinship Care

Finally, CWLA would be remiss if we did not highlight one legislative solution which is showing growing bipartisan support, kinship care. Kinship care is an important permanency option for child welfare systems. In some instances, support for these grandparent and other relative families can provide a vital support for these youth. In 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was adopted by this

[10] Pecora, P.J., Kessler, R.C., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A. C., English, D., White, J., Hiripi, E., White, C. R., Wiggins, T., & Holmes, K. (2005). Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study. Available online at http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/NorthwestAlumniStudy.htm. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.

Subcommittee and many of the members of this Congress voted for it. It recognizes kinship placements as a critical permanency option. We now have bipartisan bills in both houses, S. 661 in the Senate and H.R. 2188 in the House, to extend Title IV–E funding to these kinship placements. CWLA strongly believes that extending Title IV–E support in this way can play a vital role in assisting young people leaving the foster care system and can help before they reach the age of eighteen.

CONCLUSION

CWLA appreciates the opportunity to offer our comments to the Subcommittee in regard to youth transitioning out of foster care. As this Subcommittee moves forward, we look forward to a continued dialogue with its members and all Members of Congress. We hope this hearing serves as a building block for future efforts that will create the means for reforms that result in increased successful transitions for these youth.

Statement of Everychild Foundation

The Problem: The "Transition Cliff"

- Many children with abuse and neglect histories never reunite with their families or find alternative permanent homes; this population of abused children graduate or "emancipate" from the child welfare system
- Children who emancipate from the foster care system face disproportiately higher rates of:
- Unemployment
- Lower Educational Attainment
- Incarceration
- Dependence on public assistance
- Substance abuse
- Non-marital childbirth
- Other high-risk behaviors.[1]
- The lack of a "safety net" for these former foster youth—now young adults—means that they truly struggle to "make ends meet" often ultimately becoming a more burdensome and larger cost to society than if a much smaller, up-front investment had simply been made to better prepare and advise them during transition and the years preceding it.
- One **shocking statistic** best explains how the system has failed them: **over 70% of all State Penitentiary inmates have spent time in the foster care system** according to the May 12, 2006 Select Committee Hearing of the California Legislature. (This includes group homes and informal out of home placements/arrangements.)
- The public knows little or nothing about the difficulties facing this group of young adults.
- The population of emancipated foster youth face unique challenges such as:
- Lack of stable or affordable housing leading to homelessness
- Lack of employment opportunities
- Lack of medical care / coverage
- Mental health problems
- Early or unplanned pregnancies
- When provided with information about the poor prospects for this population, most people say that the age at which the average young person is completely on their own is 23; 1/3 of respondents say it is 25 or older.[2]

This presentation includes a compilation of recent statistics (by no means exhaustive) to illustrate the significant ramifications of failing to assist these young adults.

[1] http://www.covdove.org/Inside/Statistics.htm, Covenant House California Statistics (retrieved February 2006).

[2] http://www.financeproject.org/Publications/foster%20care%20final1.pdf

Our position is that there are steps that the government and community can take to help ensure that these youths make a smooth transition and become productive member of the community.

The direct public expense of not doing so is enormous, according to various experts the authors queried who work closely with emancipated foster youth. consider these typical annual costs they cited:

- **Housing** an emancipated foster youth **in a program providing support services** (mental health, educational and vocational counseling, job placement, financial literacy and life skills training, mentoring) such as Hillsides in Pasadena—**$20,000—$25,000.**
- **Incarceration** for the same young adult**—between $55,000 and $115,000** (depending upon the type of facility), according to the State's Safety and Welfare Remedial Plan filed in April of this year.
- *Residence in a mental health facility—$215,000.*
- The Basics:
- Nationally, about 20,000 youth aged 16 or older make the transition from foster care to legal emancipation each year.[3]
- From January 1, 2004 to December 31, 2004, 4,255 children emancipated from foster care in California.[4]
- Of these 4,255 emancipating youth 1,402 were located in Los Angeles.
- Children who emancipate from the child welfare system are unlikely to find safe, affordable housing.
- Within 2–4 years of emancipation, 25% of emancipated youth have been homeless for at least one night.[5]
- In California, 65% of youth leaving care do so without a place to live.[6]
- Nearly 40% of transitioning youth will be homeless within eighteen months of discharge.[7]
- In Los Angeles and Alameda counties, 50% of emancipated youth will be homeless within six months.[8]
- Without housing, youth are less likely to complete their education, find employment, and gain access to health care, all of which jeopardize their ability to make a successful transition to independence.[9]
- Studies found that between 44–77% of emancipating youth have completed high school as compared to 93% of non-foster care youth [10]
- Research shows that only 1% to 5% of foster youth ever graduate from college.[11]

Employment Problems: Children who emancipate from the child welfare system are unlikely to find employment opportunities.

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[3] http://www.casey.org/MediaCXenter/MediaKit/FActSheet.htm, Child Welfare Fact Sheet published by Casey Family Programs (based on data from a period ending September 30, 2001).

[4] Child Welfare Service Reports for California (2005). Retrieved in February 2006 from University of California at Berkeley Center for Social Services Research Website. URL: http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports/. See also, http://calwv.org/jjds/chap6.html, *Juvenile Justice in California, Part II: Dependency System*, Chap. VI, Prepared by the League of Women Voters of California, July 1998.

[5] April 2003 Press Release from the Office of the Governor of California, reprinted on http://www.buildingc3.com/item.asp?id=196. See also Finessa Ferrell, *Life After Foster Care, http://www.ncsl.org/programs/pubs/slmag/2004/04OctNov*_Fostercare.pdf (2004).

[6] Issue Brief, Ensuring Access to Healthy Young Adults Program for Transitioning Youth, citing a California Department of Social Services 2002 Study: Report of the Housing Needs of Emancipated Foster/Probation Youth; California Department of Social Services. (2002) *Report on the Survey of the Housing Needs of Emancipated Foster/Probation Youth*. Independent Living Program Policy Unit, Child and Youth Permanency Branch.

[7] U.S. General Accounting Office. (1999) *Foster Care: Effectiveness of Independent Living Services Unknown*. (GAO/HEHS–00–13). Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office. See also, Juvenile Justice in California Part II: Dependency System, 1998, http://calwv.org/jjds/chap6.html.

[8] Covenant House of California statistics available at http://www.covdove.org/Inside/Statistics.htm (2004).

[9] Los Angeles County Economy and Efficiency Commission. (2002) *A Review of Emancipation Services*. Los Angeles, CA: Author. Available online at http://eec.co.la.ca.us/pubfiles/cntyops/0202_EmancipationServices.htm.

[10] Id.

[11] Finessa Ferrell, Life After Foster Care, http://www.ncsl.org/programs/pubs/slmag/2004/04OctNov_Fostercare.pdf (2004).

- Studies show that approximately 51% of youth are unemployed within 2–4 years of emancipation.[12]
- According to the California Department of Social Services, as of December 2001, about 50% of emancipated foster youth were not employed.[13]
- If employed, former foster care youth earn significantly lower wages than their low-income peers.
- aOne study found that emancipated foster youth earned an average of $6000 per year, which is well below the national poverty line of $7890.
- Over a three-year period, no more than 45% of these foster youth reported earnings in any one quarter.

The Impact of Failing Our Emancipated Youth: The Cost of Benefits and Incarceration

- The State must bear the following significant economic and other costs of youth who end up incarcerated: [14]
- Criminal justice costs (i.e., operation of criminal justice system in terms of police, prosecution, courts, probation, incarceration, parole etc.)
- Medical costs borne by the government
- Property damage
- Loss of productivity to society
- Loss of work time by victims, their families and the offender
-
- Loss of property values in areas of high crime
- Pain and suffering of crime victims and society

The Impact of Failing Our Emancipated Youth: The Cost of Benefits and Incarceration

- 40% of former foster youth are a cost to the community.[15]
- The cost to the community occurs within 2–4 years of emancipation because 40% of emancipated youth have been on public assistance or incarcerated by that time.[16]
- Several studies reveal that girls who emancipate from foster care are far more likely (approximately 3×) than their peers to have a child by 19.[17]
- Approximately 50% of females in the foster care system receive AFDC/TANF Medi-Cal within one to six years of emancipation. In contrast, approximately 6% of all females age 19–29 in California received TANF in 1999.[18]

Statement of Job Corps Partnering with the Foster Care System

This statement is submitted on behalf of the Job Corps program which, as authorized by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, is charged with providing education and training for economically disadvantaged youth ages 16-24, who face multiple barriers to employment. One such group is homeless, runaway, or foster care youth (section 144(3)(C), Subtitle C). The most recent data from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) show that over 500,000 American children live in foster care. Each year, it is estimated that between 19,000 and 25,000 of these children, ages 18–21, "age out" of the foster care system, and are forced to live on their own.

Job Corps is an open entry, open exit residential national education and training program. The program has been in existence for 43 years and serves approximately 60,000 youth annually. There are 122 Job Corps centers located in 48 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Job Corps is legislatively mandated to maintain a capacity of approximately 44,000 youth. Currently Job Corps has approxi-

[12] April 2003 Press Release from the Office of the Governor of California, reprinted on http://www.buildingc3.com/item.asp?id=196. One study showed that 23% of California former foster care youth were unemployed within a 13-month period.
[13] http://www.familiesforchildren.org/statistics/htm.
[14] See http://www.lao.ca.gov/1995/050195_juv_crime/kkpart6.html.
[15] Id.
[16] April 2003 Press Release from the Office of the Governor of California, reprinted on http://www.buildingc3.com/item.asp?id=196.
[17] See http://www.teenpregnancy.org/resources/reading/pdf/Fostering_Hope.pdf.
[18] Youth Emancipating from Foster Care in California: Findings Using Linked Administrative Data, July 31, 2002, Summary of Findings by the Research and Evaluation Branch, Research and Development Division of the California Department of Social Services.

mately 4,000 slots annually that go unfilled in the program. This presents an unparalleled opportunity for both the Job Corps program and emancipated foster care youth. For eligible foster care youth, Job Corps can provide transitional housing, job training, primary health care, and referrals to community organizations and state agencies.

Job Corps has been actively involved with making connections with the foster care system and is ideally suited to service foster care youth in need of additional education and training. Job Corps Outreach and Admissions offices have been directed to access the foster care system in their area by connecting with state agencies and programs. Each Outreach and Admissions operator has been provided with a state by state directory of Foster Care programs which includes state coordinators, child welfare Youth Advisory Boards (YAB) and resources to educate Job Corps staff on the various assistance programs in their area. Currently Job Corps has approximately 166 foster care students enrolled in the program and is actively engaged in efforts to increase foster care youth enrollment.

In addition to educating Job Corps staff on partnering opportunities with the foster care system, outreach and admissions providers educate eligible foster children about Job Corps. The program has also tried to ease the transition of current students who were foster children upon separation from the program. Foster children that separate from the Job Corps program, who are eligible for placement services; have a special case note placed in their electronic file, which helps their career transition specialist work to obtain additional federal funds and grants for assistance with independent living, known as the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independent Living Program.

To date Job Corps has strengthen its relationship with the foster care system by accomplishing the following:

- Established a relationship with Casey Family Programs
- Casey Family Programs presented at the Job Corps National Conference, November 6, 2006
- Job Corps had an exhibit at the Casey Family Programs Conference, Oct 29–31, 2006
- Job Corps released a Program Instruction Notice, September 8, 2006, providing guidance to the Job Corps field on connecting to the Foster Care system
- Presented at the Independent Living Conference in Indiana in June 2007
- Scheduled to speak at the September 2007 It's My Life Conference

Job Corps continues to explore new ideas to better connect to the foster care youth system. Job Corps' future plans to better connect are:

- Continue developing and strengthening the partnership with Casey Family Programs and other foster care organizations
- Develop a Technical Assistance Guide for Job Corps field staff
- Develop a list of best practices and model programs to replicate
- Continue to conduct and expand outreach activities to all foster care youth
- Explore MOU possibilities between DoL & HHS

Over the years, Job Corps has helped to guide more than two million youth to opportunity and success. As a result of our commitment to achievement, training, and education, Job Corps has helped young Americans establish their place in the workforce and become contributing citizens in their communities. Job Corps stands ready to work with the foster care system, Congress and local communities to provide assistance and program services to emancipated foster care youth.

Statement of Kevin Drollinger, Epworth Children and Family Services, St. Louis, Missouri

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee:

As the Executive Director of Epworth Children and Family Services in St. Louis, Missouri, I am pleased to see Congress addressing the critical issues facing foster care youth around the country. For more than 100 years, Epworth has provided a wide array of services to at-risk youth and their families—first as an orphanage in the late 1800s and now providing education, therapeutic services, intensive and day treatment programs, and transitional living, independent living, family support and crisis shelter services.

In our region, the critical issues facing youth about to age out of foster care are widely apparent. As of March 2007, the Missouri Department of Social Services re-

ported 9,818 children in the state's foster care system. Of those, an estimated twenty-two percent—just over one out of every five children—are age 16 or older. Paralleling national statistics, these teens face monumental challenges as they become emancipated adults. Half of all foster teens in the St. Louis region age out of foster care either homeless or become homeless in later life. Less than half possess a high school diploma or its equivalent and more than 80 percent of former foster care females become pregnant and have children before the age of 21.

While we help many of these teens navigate the complex foster care system and develop the daily living skills needed to become contributing adults in the community, they often express feelings of frustration and isolation, not knowing where to turn for guidance and further resources. Many have changed temporary homes, residential treatment centers or group homes multiple times, have transferred to several schools throughout the course of their education (and even throughout a single school year), and are passed from one case manager and therapist to another throughout their time in foster care. These teens, expected to be fully independent and thriving after leaving foster care at age 18 or even 21, are faced with the difficulties of finding jobs and a place to live, understanding basic finances, and obtaining regular medical care.

In December 2004, nine visionary philanthropic organizations came together to see if pooled resources and collaborative efforts could "re-invent" the wheel and provide foster teens with centralized resources and guidance to help them acquire the daily living skills necessary to thrive as adults. With an initial investment of $600,000 over three years, these organizations then brought together nonprofit organizations such as Epworth and began to identify the gaps in services for older foster teens.

After working for more than 18 months, the St. Louis Aging Out Initiative debuted in late 2006, with Epworth serving as the lead service agency. The initiative establishes a youth-friendly, centralized resource center for older foster teens where they can learn about the many resources available and talk with teen peer advisors about their concerns. Starting with teens as young as 16 years old, the Center will provide guidance up to age 25. Referral information is available via on onsite computer and individual services are provided monthly in groups and individual meetings. The Center also operates a 24-hour helpline. With a positive youth development approach of "nothing about us, without us," the Center also has a Youth Advisory Board and encourages foster youth to collectively determine the services needed and how to best address concerns. Among the goals identified—to assist the majority of youth involved in the Center to obtain a GED or high school diploma; to create "Life Binders" for all participants that include important documents such as a birth certificate, immunization records, family and personal medical history, and school transcripts; and to educate youth so that they are adept at self-advocacy skills that enable them to self-direct their own care and placement, secure a job or enrollment in post-secondary education; and handle personal finances.

National literature and research shows promise for this approach. If true independence is measured by age 25, instead of age 16 or 18, foster youth have a better chance to thrive. By linking and prioritizing the services that foster youth desire and need, we provide a critical service to the community at large.

Our local approach to this national issue has already sparked national attention. In July 2007, we were awarded a $500,000 matching grant from the prestigious Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to further establish the Aging Out Project. Efforts already are under way to link more service providers into the Center so that foster youth have an increasing number of resources to help them become independent.

Through the St. Louis Aging Out Initiative, our eyes are on education, employment, and independent living. We also have worked with other social service organizations throughout Missouri and advocated for expansion of healthcare benefits for older foster care youth. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (AFCARS Report, 2005a), fewer than one-third of all states offer former foster youth ages 18 to 21 access to Medicaid coverage. In July 2007, Missouri Governor Matt Blunt signed a bill expanding healthcare coverage to Missouri foster care youth up to age 21. Now efforts are under way to have all states pass similar measures.

Federal and state governments spend significant monies on supporting foster care youth until age 18. The notion that these teens, who have been through so much in their lives already, are able to magically become adults with no support, is simply not realistic. Stronger mentor programs, improved transferability of educational services and records, and collaborative community efforts such as the St. Louis Aging Out Initiative should be encouraged across the country. And because national and local statistics already document the challenges facing older foster teens, com-

prehensive programs to help improve graduation levels and teach sustainable daily living skills should be encouraged and supported.

As Congressman Jim McDermott (D–WA), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support noted in mid-July, federal and state governments function as "de-facto parents of foster children." It is prudent that Congress as well as state leaders regularly evaluate whether or not these children need guidance even after they are emancipated from state care. Congressman McDermott says a concerted effort should be made to determine whether programs meet "that obligation, or whether we are simply showing these kids the door without sufficient support, resources, and skills to succeed."

If we are to believe in the initial premise for bringing children into state custody—for their safety, health, and stability—then all of us should be mindful of our duty to support them into adulthood.

It is our experience at Epworth as well as in the start of the Aging Out Initiative, that foster youth do, indeed, need support, resources and skills development after age 18. The sad facts are that foster youth who are not supported and guided as they find their place in society become new entrants into social welfare system as adults. With Congress focusing on the "no child left behind" axiom in education, it is just as important to focus on the "no child left behind" in foster care. As de-facto parents, we should do our utmost to ensure they have the chances and resources they need to find their own individual strengths and thrive.

I thank you for this opportunity to add my written comments to the oral testimony given to the subcommittee on this crucial foster care issue.

Headquartered in Webster Groves, Epworth Children and Family Services has offered therapeutic and education services for at-risk youth and their families since it was founded more than 140 years ago. Originally a Methodist-founded orphanage based in Warrenton, Mo., Epworth has grown to offer a full array of services, including intensive residential and day treatment services, educational programs, and individualized and family therapy. The organization also operates acclaimed transitional living and independent living programs and has a 24-hour youth emergency service hotline and shelter for teens. Epworth is accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) and is a charter member of the Missouri Coalition of Children's Agencies (MCCA). In 2000, Epworth was the first social service agency in Missouri to be honored with the Missouri Team Quality Award.

Kids Are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now
July 12, 2007

Dear Chairman McDermott, and Members of the Subcommittee:

The *Kids Are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now* campaign thanks you for the opportunity to submit this written statement for your July 12, 2007 hearing's record, on the subject of services and outcomes for children who age out of the foster care system. Kids Are Waiting (KAW), a project of The Pew Charitable Trusts, is a national, nonpartisan campaign dedicated to ensuring that all children in foster care have the safe, permanent families they deserve by reforming the federal financing structure that governs our nation's foster care program. The campaign applauds the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support for your dedication to our nation's abused and neglected children. This hearing—indeed the series of hearings you are holding—contribute greatly to identifying the areas in need of reform, as well as providing the essential forum in which to consider meaningful solutions.

At the heart of supporting teens who age out of the foster care system, must be a determined, relentless effort by policy makers, service providers, and community members to find a safe, permanent, loving family for each of them. In the case of the 24,000 teens who age out each year, never was it more true, that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

As the Members of the Subcommittee are aware, there are more than 513,000 children in foster care. Each year, thousands are exited from the system to face life on their own without the benefit of belonging to a permanent family. Tragically, despite an over all *decrease* in the number of children entering foster care in recent years, the number of teens aging out is *increasing*.

In May of this year, KAW, in partnership with the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, published a new report on the very topic the subcommittee is addressing today. "Time for Reform: Aging Out and On Their Own" reports a 41% in-

crease in the number of teens aging out of foster care from 1998 to 2005—more than 24,000 for the last year in which government statistics are available.[i]

Outcomes for youth who age out of foster care are grim, and transitions to adulthood and independence are often rocky. As our report details:

- One in four will be incarcerated within the first two years after they leave the system.[ii]
- Over one-fifth will become homeless at some time after age 18.[iii]
- Approximately 58 percent had a high school degree at age 19 compared to 87 percent of a national comparison group of non-foster youth.[iv]
- Of youth who aged out of foster care and are over the age of 25, less than 3 percent have their college degrees [v]
- compared with 28 percent of the general population.[vi]

Despite the good intentions and sometimes valiant efforts of most social workers, judges, foster parents and others, the reality remains that the foster care system is plagued with issues that conspire to keep children in the system too long, and away from the permanent, loving families they deserve.

As today's hearing points out, much more needs to be done to ensure that adequate support is in place for those who may age out of the system without a permanent family. A number of policies have been identified to better serve young adults who age out of foster care, including: extending foster care and Medicaid eligibility up to age 21 for all youth and providing services under the Chafee Foster Care Independence act to all youth who leave care, not just youth aging out between ages 18 and 21.

While KAW appreciates the enormous importance of benefits to help foster youth transition successfully to adulthood, our campaign's main focus is to highlight the urgent need for reform of federal financing policies, namely Section IV–E of the Social Security Act. Current policies are far too complex and outdated. All too often they work against what's best for children and families. These rules can prevent case workers and other professionals from connecting children and families with the services to help them stay together, to keep children from entering care in the first place.

Under the current financing structure, 61% of all federal money allocated for child welfare services is mandated to be used for out-of-home foster care payments and related administrative and training costs. This leaves less than 40% of federal funds available to assist states in providing essential services tailored to meet the needs of their communities—services such as foster care prevention, family reunification, foster and adoptive parent recruitment, subsidized guardianship and post-placement services.

Federal policies should make certain those who do enter the system don't grow up in foster care. No child should age out of the system on their own. Congress can be part of the solution. By changing the way the federal government pays for services, we can help states prevent some children from entering foster care, while helping others leave the system more expeditiously to families that have been reunited, or, when that is not possible, to new families through adoption, or sometimes permanent guardianship.

In 2004, the national, non-partisan Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care recommended a reliable federal financing system with both increased flexibility and accountability as a means to prevent children from languishing in foster care. New federal financing policies, combined with recently enacted state court improvements, would provide professionals who serve children and families with better tools to help more families stay together, ensure children in foster care exit the system for safe, permanent families, and reduce the number of youth who age out each year.

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[i] Kids Are Waiting and Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. Time for Reform: Aging Out and On Their Own. May 2007. Accessed July 11, 2007: http://kidsarewaiting.org/reports/files/AgingOut.pdf

[ii] Mark E. Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Sherri Terao, Noel Bost, Gretchen Ruth Cusick, Thomas Keller, and Judy Havlicek. Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19, Chapin Hall, 2005.

[iii] Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study, Casey Family Programs, 1998.

[iv] Courtney, M.E. & Dworsky, A. (2005).Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 19. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children.

[v] Pecora, P.J., Kessler, R.C., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A.C., English, D., White, J., Hiripi, E., White, C.R., Wiggins, T., and Holmes, K. (2005). Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest foster care alumni study. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.

[vi] National Census Bureau. "Educational Attainment in the United States: 2004." Accessed April 12, 2007: http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/04eductableA.xls

Specifically, KAW promotes the following policy options, recommended by the Pew Commission, to address the problem of growing numbers of youth aging out of our foster care each year:

1. **Establish a federal foster care financing system that States can rely on to be sufficient and flexible.** Today's federal IV–E financing incentives favor foster care over other services that could keep families together, reunify them quickly and safely, and, when that is not possible, help children leave foster care to join safe, permanent families through adoption or guardianship. Addressing the inflexibility of current federal IV–E funding is critical to ensuring that case workers and other professionals can deliver services that are tailored to meet the needs of each child and family they serve. For example, services such as family counseling or referrals for drug treatment programs can both prevent the need for foster care or help some children reunify with their families.

With more flexible funds, states and tribes could help find more children permanent families through activities such as increased and improved foster and adoptive parent recruitment, or help new permanent families be successful when reunification is not possible by providing more post-placement supports.

2. **Help more children leave foster care by supporting federal guardianships for relatives and other caregivers.** In most states, relatives and others who become permanent, legal guardians for a child in foster care lose federal financial assistance and services once the child exits foster care (some adoptions receive federal support). Although some relatives decide to adopt their kin, adoption is not a viable option for others. For example, it may not be appropriate to terminate parental rights for a parent with significant disabilities who physically cannot parent, but wants to remain in the lives of the children who love her. Or an older youth who maintains close ties with his or her birth parents may not want those parental rights terminated. An estimated 20,000 children living in long-term arrangements with relatives today could leave foster care if federal foster care funds could be used to support guardianship. Legislation to address support for relatives has been introduced in the 110th Congress: The Kinship Caregiver Support Act (S. 661/ H.R. 2188).

3. **Reward states for reducing the number of children in foster care and achieving all forms of permanence.** States should be rewarded for reducing the number of children in foster care, rather than punished by losing federal funds for case workers. Under the current system, states lose money for caseworkers when the caseload declines. States should be allowed to reinvest savings from safely reducing their foster care case loads into their child welfare programs.

4. **Make all children eligible for federal foster care support.** The link between eligibility for federal foster care support under Title IV–E to eligibility for the now-defunct Aid to Families with Dependent Children program should be removed. Social workers should be focused on helping children find safe, permanent families, rather than wasting hours chasing down paperwork related to a parent's eligibility for a program that hasn't existed for 10 years. Native American children under the jurisdiction of a tribal government are also not eligible to receive the benefits of Title IV–E, since tribes are not eligible to apply for this federal program. Tribal governments should be allowed to apply for Title IV–E funds directly and operate the program for children under their care.

Each day we wait for foster care financing reform, 67 additional children leave the system, entirely alone, because we have failed to find them families they can count on. Foster children are America's children. They deserve our best efforts to provide them with loving, supportive families, for a happy and safe childhood, and a brighter future.

We reiterate our gratitude to the Chairman and other Members of the Subcommittee for their leadership on behalf of children in foster care. The KAW campaign stands ready to be of assistance to you and your staff as foster care financing reform solutions are considered during this session of the 110th Congress.

Respectfully submitted,

JENNIFER COLE
Campaign Director

Statement of North American Council on Adoptable Children,

St. Paul, Minnesota

As Chairman McDermott stated in an announcement of today's hearing, "When most children reach the age of 18, their parents continue to support and help them during their transition into adulthood. As the de-facto parents of foster children, we should do no less. We need to evaluate whether we are meeting that obligation, or whether we are simply showing these kids the door without sufficient support, resources and skills to succeed."

We absolutely have an obligation to support youth who age out of foster care. But first and foremost, we have a responsibility to ensure that they have a permanent family who will be there to help them with their transitions and with the joys and challenges of their young adult and adult lives. If we are able to ensure that more children can leave foster care quickly and safely to join permanent, loving families—or to provide preventive supports and services that can keep families together and prevent children from entering foster care in the first place—then we will have fewer young people who age out of foster care on their own.

Youth who age out of care face enormous challenges. Pennsylvania resident Jessica has a sadly typical story. Jessica's mom was a drug addict and prostitute whose boyfriends abused Jessica. As a young teen she entered foster care and was placed in a group home. "No one ever talked about adoption," Jessica remembers. "I wanted a family and I would have considered adoption, but no one ever asked."

"The scary part was when I turned 18," explains Jessica. "I had nowhere to go. They told me, ?When you turn 18, basically, you're done.'" Jessica adds, "When I left, I was unprepared to be on my own. I didn't know anything about finances. I had gone to independent living classes, but I couldn't remember anything." Jessica spent several years working and drinking, and soon became pregnant. It wasn't until Jessica's daughter's paternal grandparents took her under their care as a young adult that she finally had the family she needed and deserved.

We at the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) believe that, of the many barriers that keep children and youth from achieving permanence, the following are some of the most significant. First and foremost, the federal child welfare financing system relies too heavily on funding and placing children in foster care rather than investing in preserving and rebuilding families or better supporting new permanent families for children who cannot return safely home. Below we detail four ways to invest in families to prevent youth from aging out of care: (1) implement federally supported guardianship; (2) provide support to birth families; (3) increase access to adoption assistance; and (4) fund post-permanency support.

Over the past three years, NACAC has worked with youth from across the country to tell their stories about experiences with the foster care system. The stories about what these youth have endured have guided our thinking and understanding about the federal solutions that would work best to ensure that no youth leaves care without the connections that they say make a difference in their lives and their futures. In general, the system at every level—local, state and federal—should do a better job of listening to and respecting the voices of youth and their ideas about ways to improve their individual and collective situations. We've had the privilege of working with some of the most resilient youth imaginable, yet we know that there are countless others who have no voice and no future. The following four recommendations would go a long to change the trajectory of bad outcomes of youth aging out of care.

Implement Federally Supported Subsidized Guardianship

About one-quarter of foster children are cared for by grandparents or other relatives.[1] Right now, almost 20,000 of these children cannot return to their birth families and have been with their relatives for at least a year.[2] These stable, loving kin families could provide a perfect permanent family for many foster children, but the children remain stuck in foster care simply because adoption is not the right choice for their family. These youth will age out of foster care unless we offer them a better permanency option.

Illinois resident Rob knows firsthand the value of guardianship. Placed in foster care due to his mother's mental health, he and his two sisters eventually ended up

[1] Generations United. (2006). *All children deserve a permanent home: Subsidized guardianships as a common sense solution for children in long-term relative foster care.* Washington, DC: Author.

[2] Children and Family Research Center. (2004). *Family ties: Supporting permanence for children in safe and stable foster care with relatives and other caregivers.* Urbana-Champaign, IL: School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urban-Champaign.

in a subsidized guardianship placement with his aunt. One of the first children served through Illinois' guardianship waiver, Rob found safety, stability, and love with his aunt while maintaining ties to the mother he loves. For Rob, guardianship was a lifesaver that should be available to more children and youth. He explains, "I was able to find my miracle through subsidized guardianship, but other foster children are not so lucky. The federal government should provide funding to states for children who leave foster care to live permanently with grandparents, aunts, uncles, or other guardians. In many cases, if relatives choose to become legal guardians rather than foster parents, they lose federal foster care assistance, which pays for things like food and clothing. That just isn't right."

California resident Anne is raising her two teenaged grandsons, who will soon age out of care. She would love to become their legal guardian, but relies on the support she gets in foster care. One of the boys has moderate hearing loss, sensory motor integration problems, difficulty in school, and Asperger's syndrome. The other was sexually abused and remains angry and traumatized today. Although she is committed to caring for the boys forever, Anne doesn't want to adopt them because they are—and will always be—her grandsons. Guardianship under California's KinGAP program wasn't a good option because the boys would lose the extra supports and services that meet their special needs. So, they remain in foster care, and the family contends with ongoing court visits and caseworker oversight. "I would have loved to have taken the boys out of foster care and become their guardian," explains Anne. "But I could only have done that if the boys would have been able to continue to receive support for their special needs. I couldn't have afforded to pay for all those services on my own."

Subsidized guardianship allowed Rob to leave care with a place to call home, both legally and emotionally. Unfortunately, Anne's grandsons will not experience this legal permanency and will transition to adulthood knowing that they spent their teenage years as foster children. All children deserve the option of federally supported guardianship so they do not have to age out of care without legal permanency.

Recommendation: **Federal waivers have proven the efficacy of subsidized guardianship. In the nine years since Illinois implemented its guardianship program, 9,596 children have left foster care to legal, supported guardianships.[3] While waivers allow states to experiment with needed innovations, they are merely temporary solutions. We now need subsidized guardianship to be an approved permanency option, included in the Title IV–E program like adoption assistance. Children in stable foster placements with relatives and other committed caregivers would benefit from greater federal support for guardianship, allowing children to leave care, eliminate costly caseworker visits, and reduce unnecessary court oversight. A federally supported guardianship program—such as the one proposed in the Kinship Caregiver Support Act—could help almost 20,000 children leave foster care to a permanent family *right now*. Thousands more could be served each year in the future.**

Provide Support to Birth Families

Many youth who age out of foster care return to their birth families—the only families they have ever known. For a significant proportion of children and youth in foster care, a return home is the right permanency option. Their families, however, often need supportive services to address the issues that brought them into the child welfare system in the first place. The *Green Book* states: "It is generally agreed that it is in the best interests of children to live with their families. To this end, experts emphasize both the value of preventive and rehabilitative services and the need to limit the duration of foster care placements."[4] Federal funding does not

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[3] Personal communication with Leslie Cohen. (March 2007). Children and Family Research Center.

[4] U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means. (2004). *2004 green book: Section 11,—child protection, foster care, and adoption assistance.* [Online]. Available: http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/multidb.cgi?WAISdbName=108_green_book+2004+Green+Book+%28108th+Congress%29&WAISqueryRule=%28%24WAISqueryString%29+AND+%28repttype%3D%24sect+OR+repttype%3D%24sect1+OR+repttype%3D%24sect2%29&WAIS queryString=duration+of+foster+care+placements&WAIStemplate=multidb_results.html& Submit.=Submit&WrapperTemplate=wmprints_wrapper.html&WAISmaxHits=40. [Retrieved May 7, 2006.]

reflect this priority—90 percent of federal funding can be used by states only after Title IV–E-eligible children have entered foster care or been adopted.[5]

Since so much federal funding is for children who have entered care, states do not have sufficient resources to invest in birth family support and reunification. In recent years, we have seen the percentage of foster children who reunite with their birth families go down—from 62 percent in 1998 to 54 percent in 2005.[6]

This lack of support can translate into slow or non-existing support to struggling birth families, and certainly contributes to youth aging out of care. Michael of West Virginia was separated from his brothers and sister and moved more than 18 times during six years in care. At 18, Michael aged out of foster care with no permanent family, as did one of his brothers. His sister was adopted and his youngest brother remains in care. Michael reflects, "In my opinion, foster care destroyed our whole sense of family in the end. We can't sit down together and feel like we are siblings. It becomes more like, 'Oh, I know that person' but it's not like, 'Oh, he's my brother.'"

Now 21, Michael wishes the state had done more to help his mom keep the family together: "If the state had invested the same money they spent putting us in all those placements into weekly visits with our mother and had given her skill lessons, it might not have escalated to us needing to go into permanent foster care."

Stephanie from Washington State was placed in foster care because of her mother's addiction to drugs. Recalls Stephanie, "It was hard not knowing if I was safe, walking the streets at midnight because my mom was worried somebody was after her, having to look after my little brother because my mom was on house arrest, trying to find something to eat."

While Stephanie and her brother were in foster care, Stephanie's mother received extensive services. She participated in in-patient and out-patient drug treatment, self-esteem classes, anger management, parenting and nutrition classes, AA meetings, Bible study, daily shelter meetings, and group and individual counseling.

Once Stephanie was reunited with her mom and brother, her life got better: "I became more outgoing, I was more comfortable with myself, and my grades improved. I was in plays and musicals at church." Stephanie says, "If I could wish for anything it would be that our family could have gotten help sooner. I don't know what life would have been like if I had stayed in foster care or been adopted, but I know if I didn't have my family around me—my mom, my brother, my grandparents, and my cousins—I would be devastated. My family means everything to me."

Kelly of Maryland is the mother of three young children who are thriving today. Life was not so good five years ago: Kelly was addicted to drugs and her children entered foster care as a result. After struggling to kick her habit, Kelly found a program that helped her put her life back together. Kelly explains, "I had everybody pulling for me as far as my social worker and my counselors at the program trying to help me get immediate Section 8 housing." She continues, "They also funded my counseling, and they got me parenting classes. Life in recovery is so good and so wonderful," Kelly says. "Honestly, I don't have any desire to go back to that way of life. I'm grateful for my life today." Today, Kelly works with other birth parents to ensure that they can be reunified with their children

Kelly and Stephanie, sadly, are not typical in that their families were able to receive the comprehensive services they needed in order to be safely, permanently reunited. A recent survey of child welfare administrators found that substance abuse and poverty are the most critical problems facing families being investigated for child maltreatment.[7] In some areas, substance abuse is an issue for one-third to two-thirds of the families involved in child welfare.[8] Unfortunately, only 10 percent of child welfare agencies report that they can find drug treatment programs for clients who need it within 30 days.[9] Almost no drug-addicted parents can access drug treatment programs with a mother-child residential component, and few are able to

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[5] In FY 2006 the appropriation for Title IV–E foster care and adoption assistance programs is $6.48 billion while the funding for Title IV–B Parts 1 and 2 (Safe and Stable Families Program) is only $721.7 million.

[6] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2006). AFCARS report #10 (Preliminary FY 2005 estimates). [Online]. Available: http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report13htm [Retrieved February, 2007].

[7] National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research. (2001). *Current trends in child abuse prevention, reporting, and fatalities: The 1999 fifty state survey.* Chicago: Prevent Child Abuse America.

[8] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1999). *Blending perspectives and building common ground: A report to congress on substance abuse and child protection.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

[9] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1999). *(See complete citation above.)*

participate in comprehensive programs that address issues of parenting and housing along with substance abuse. For families dealing with poverty and housing issues, support is also hard to come by. As the National Center for Child Protection Reform notes, "Three separate studies since 1996 have found that 30 percent of America's foster children could be safely in their own homes right now, if their birth parents had safe, affordable housing."[10]

Investing in at-risk families has been shown to work. Indiana had a federal IV–E waiver through which counties provided community- and home-based alternatives that sought to reduce foster care usage. The waiver demonstration showed that such investments work: 45.6 percent of children assigned to the waiver group never entered placement compared to 38 percent of children in the control group, and 77 percent of children in out-of-home care in the waiver group reunified with a parent compared with 66 percent of children in the control group.

Also using a IV–E waiver, Delaware demonstrated that investing in substance abuse treatment had positive outcomes for children: the project's foster children spent 14 percent less time in foster care than similar children who did not participate in the waiver, and total foster care costs were reduced.[11] Certain counties in North Carolina used a federal child welfare waiver to cut down on out-of-home placements by investing in court mediation, post-adoption services, intensive family preservation services, and other interventions.[12]

Recommendations: **Currently, for every dollar that the federal government spends on family preservation and post-permanency support, nine dollars are spent on IV–E children who are in foster care or who have been adopted from care. The federal government must significantly increase its investment in Title IV–B Parts 1 and 2, and provide states with increased flexibility in how they spend federal child welfare monies. Many of the foster children aging out of care today can attest to the fact that if the state had spent more money on keeping their families together, they could have saved on costly and unnecessary foster care placements.**

In addition, if states successfully reduce the use of foster care, they should be able to reinvest saved federal dollars into preventive and post-permanency services to ensure that more families—whether reunited, adoptive, or guardianship—can stay together. Currently, when states reduce the number of IV–E eligible children in foster care, the federal government reduces its payment to the state. We recommend that the federal government provide states with an amount equal to the money saved in Title IV–E maintenance payments, training, and administration. this would provide an incentive to keep or move children out of care, while also beginning to address the vase imbalance in federal funding.

Protect and Expand Adoption Assistance

Adoption from foster care can be a bright light for the future for many of the young people who otherwise would have aged out of care. Between 1998 and 2004, more than 330,000 foster children were adopted into loving, caring families. But adoption is not the end of the story. Children who have been abused or neglected—and bounced from foster home to foster home—do not emerge unscathed. The government has a moral obligation to make a long-term commitment to adoptive and guardianship families who take into their homes foster children who have languished in care for far too long, many of whom are older and have multiple special needs.

Adoption assistance (or subsidy) is one critical support for families who adopt children with special needs from the foster care system. Subsidies help strengthen these new families and enable many foster parents to adopt children already in their care by ensuring that they do not lose support as they transition to adoption.

Michigan resident Vernard adopted his son Alex when he was three. "Alex had been in 10 placements before I got him," says Vernard. Because of Alex's diagnosis of reactive attachment disorder and other special needs, Vernard recalls, "I made absolutely sure I received adoption medical subsidy prior to the adoption, because I knew accepting even a minimum amount of subsidy would be in Alex's best interest. I knew that if Alex required residential treatment or out-of-home placement—

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[10] National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. (2004). *Who is in "the system" and why* [Online]. Available: http://www.nccpr.org/newissues/5.html [May 7, 2006].

[11] U.S. General Accounting Office. (2002). *Recent legislation helps states focus on finding permanent homes for children but long-standing barriers remain*. Report to Congressional Requestors. [Online]. Available; http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d02585.pdf. [Retrieved May 7, 2006].

[12] Usher, C., Wildfire, J., Brown, E., Duncan, D., Meier, A., Salmon, M., Painter, J. & Gogan, H. (2002). *Evaluation of the Title IV–E waiver demonstration in North Carolina.* Chapel Hill, NC: Jordan Institute for Families, University of North Carolina.

due to his multiple placements, and the neglect and physical and sexual abuse he experienced—there was no way I could afford $300 to $400 a day or even trained respite support." Alex receives a $300 monthly subsidy, but during their first four years together, Vernard spent more than $850 per month to meet Alex's needs, including four different therapies to help Alex.

Currently, the federal government shares in a portion of adoption assistance costs only for children whose birth family income is below the 1996 Aid to Families with Dependent Children income standards. In contrast, states are obligated to provide protection to *every* abused or neglected child, regardless of family income. Unfortunately, a funding system that ties adoption assistance to outdated income guidelines has resulted in a system in which far fewer children are eligible for Title IV–E federal support. In 1998, 53 percent of foster children were eligible for federal support, but by 2005, the percentage had dropped to 46 percent—or 35,000 fewer Title IV–E eligible children. This number is projected to decline by another 5,000 per year.[13] The loss of IV–E eligibility often translates into the eventual loss of IV–E adoption assistance eligibility.

As a result of this declining federal support, states and localities must share a greater burden for foster care and adoption. In some states, this has severely limited the amount of funding that can go to prevention or adoption support. Recent state legislation demonstrates the need for rapid federal action on this issue. In 2005, as allowed by federal regulations, Missouri enacted legislation that would have instituted a means test for state-funded adoption assistance agreements and would have ended more than 1,000 existing adoption assistance agreements. Although a federal district court found the law unconstitutional on May 1, 2007, other states may follow Missouri's example in an attempt to save funds. Such short-sighted policies will relegate more children to foster care, rather than helping them leave care to a permanent family.

A recent study by Barth et al. suggests that such adoption assistance cuts are not cost-effective: "[C]uts in subsidy amounts could reduce the likelihood of adoption and ultimately increase costs for foster care."[14] In contrast, a new study suggests that a small increase in adoption assistance would result in increased adoptions, again saving money by reducing higher foster care costs.[15]

In the long run, adoption—even well-supported adoption—saves money and ensures that young people don't age out of care without a place to call home. The Barth et al. study demonstrates that the 50,000 children adopted each year save the government from $1 to $6 billion, when compared to maintaining those children in long-term foster care. Savings result from reduced administrative costs, medical courts, court expenses, compared to the costs of seeking adoptive families and providing adoption assistance.[16]

Recommendations: **Since 1988 NACAC has advocated for an elimination of the link between birth parent's income and eligibility for Title IV–E adoption assistance. It makes no sense to tie a child's eligibility to the financial status of parents whose parental rights have been terminated. State *and federal* assistance should be required to ensure support after adoption for every abused and neglected child—not just every child born into a poor family. As proposed by Senator Jay Rockefeller, the Adoption Equality Act of 2007 would extend Title IV–E adoption assistance to every child with special needs adopted from foster care. The House should pass a companion bill. Such legislation would also save states money currently spent on costly income-eligibility determinations. The savings could then be invested in supporting families after permanency or preventing foster care placements in the first place.**

Adoption assistance is designed to help an adoptive family meet as child's needs without creating an undue financial burden on the family. Therefore, a program in which the federal government provides support to all children with special needs adopted from foster care must maintain the federal prohibition against using the adoptive family's income to determine eligibility.

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[13] Kids Are Waiting. (2007). *Fix the Foster Care Lookback*.

[14] Barth, R., Lee, C., Wildfire, J., & Guo, S. (2006). A comparison of the governmental costs of long-term foster care and adoption. *Social Service Review, 80* (1).

[15] Hansen, M., & Hansen, B. (2006). The economics of adoption of children from foster care. *Child Welfare*, 85(3)

[16] Barth et al. (2006). *(See complete citation above.)*

Fund More Intensive Post-Permanency Support

Adoption from foster care can ensure that young people do not age out of care without a permanent and loving family. Unfortunately, some youth who age out of care today are coming from disrupted adoptive placements that did not receive enough support. Adoption assistance is a necessary support for children adopted from foster care, but it is often not enough. As Babb and Laws detail, children adopted from foster care face a variety of special needs: mental illness, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, emotional disabilities, attachment disorder, as well as physical disabilities.[17] Groze and Gruenewald agree that "[f]amilies face enormous challenges and strains in adopting a special-needs child." [18]

While adoptions doubled from 1997 to 2004, the federal investment in post-adoptive services failed to keep pace. More people are adopting more children, and the children are often older, have been in care longer, and face daunting special needs. The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare notes that older children and children with disabilities are at highest risk for adoption disruption.[19] Few states or counties have the comprehensive services necessary to meet parents' needs as they raise children who have been abused and neglected and have resulting physical and emotional special needs. We at NACAC have met far too many families who are deeply committed to their adopted children, but are unable—or barely able—to meet their children's mental health needs.

In 1998, Pam and Tom from Louisiana adopted two-and-a-half-year-old Danielle from foster care. Because of the horrible abuse she had suffered, Pam explains that by age four Danielle "was doing things like biting the upholstery leather out of my van, growling at me, destroying furniture, and trying to hang herself with a clothes hanger in the closet."

Danielle was on a waiting list for mental health services for more than six years. A few months ago, Danielle was admitted to a psychiatric hospital and was diagnosed bipolar-manic and psychotic. "I am willing to do whatever it takes to care for my children," says Pam. "But I know now I can't do it alone." Danielle's adoption subsidy is not nearly enough to cover her expenses. The family could use a trained personal care attendant, in-home therapy, family therapy, and short-term respite care. Unfortunately, due to lack of funds, many of these services are not currently available through Louisiana's adoption assistance program.

Corvette of New York adopted nine-year-old Malik from foster care. "He hallucinates and sees spiders even though there are no spiders," says Corvette. When Malik starts to see spiders, he panics and loses control. Not long ago, Malik needed to be admitted to hospital in-patient treatment for more than two weeks. Corvette has a deep, abiding love for Malik, but knows love isn't enough to heal his past hurts and meet his special needs. She relies on Medicaid, monthly adoption assistance, and other services to provide medication, therapy, a medical school setting for Malik, training for her, and more. These services enable her to keep Malik at home, which is considerably less expensive than the residential treatment he might otherwise need.

Post-adoption and post-permanency supports cut down on the risk of disruption and dissolution. Most adoptions succeed, but as many as 10 to 25 percent of public agency adoptions of older children disrupt before finalization, and a smaller percentage dissolve after adoption finalization.[20]

Recommendations: **Funding of Title IV–B must be increased, and the new funding should cover post-permanency support. Currently, good post-adoption programs are providing basic information, support, training, and other services to families in many areas. It is not enough. More resources are needed for adoption-competent mental health services and case management programs that will ensure that children with difficult histories and current mental health and behavior problems do not needlessly return to foster care or devastate their new families. If we want adoption and guardianship to be truly permanent, and to prevent children from aging out of care with no permanent family, we must find the resources to pro-**

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[17] Babbs, A., & Laws, R. (1997). *Adopting and advocating for the special needs child: A guide for parents and professionals.* Westport, CT; Bergin & Garvey.

[18] Groze, V., & Gruenewald, A. (1991). Partners: A model program for special-needs adoptive families in stress. *Child Welfare, 70* (5), 581–589.

[19] Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. (1998). *CASCW practice notes # 4: Post-adoption services.* [Online]. Available: http://ssw.che.umn.edu/img/assets/11860/PracticeNotes_4.pdf [Retrieved: May 7, 2006].

[20] National Adoption Information Clearinghouse. (2006). *Postadoption services: A bulletin for professionals.* [Online]. Available: http://naic.acf.hhs.gov [Retrieved May 2006].

vide in-depth, sometimes intensive support to these permanent families. It is far more economical—not to mention better for children and families—to provide these services now to ensure that children don't return to foster care.

Conclusion

Much needs to be done to provide supportive services to youth who are leaving foster care with no connection to a family. The government that has taken responsibility for them must continue to meet its obligation to ensure that these youth are ready for life on their own, and to provide supportive services for those youth who are not yet ready. But the best way to ensure that youth are going to make it successfully into young adulthood is to make sure that they have a permanent, legal family of their own. As we all know, families are there for youth long after age 18, and can do much more than a bureaucracy ever could to help youth handle the stresses of their lives to come.

It is time to reform the federal child welfare financing system to facilitate the achievement of the goal we all have for children and youth—that they have a safe, loving family to be there for them forever.

Statement of Patricia K. Jennings, Roswell, New Mexico

I am a mother of 5, the wife of State Senator Tim Jennings (D), Co-Chairman of Senate Finance Committee and Chairman of Tax and Revenue Stabilization Committee, an advocate for people with disabilities, and the Executive Director of the New Mexico Medical Insurance Pool and past-chairman of the National Association of Comprehensive Health Insurance Programs (NASCHIP). I authored the Pool legislation in 1987 when I could not purchase health insurance coverage for my oldest child, Courtney, who has Down's Syndrome. I have also lobbied the New Mexico Legislature and successfully lowered the school age to three for children with disabilities prior to the federal legislation passing. I have assisted in writing IDEA regulations and have been very involved in policymaking for the past 29 years.

In my spare time, I volunteer as a mediator between families of children with disabilities or at-risk needs, and the state or other systems. In 1991, the Roswell Independent School District requested that I assist them in negotiating with a very difficult family with an extremely difficult child. That is when I met the cute little second grader named Josh. However cute he might have been, Josh was in no way like the typical second grade boy. He had serious behavior and learning issues and acting out included trying to stab a bus driver with a pair of scissors he had hidden in his socks. Negotiations between the family and the schools had failed, so the schools and family agreed that I would serve as the treatment guardian for Josh, and I was appointed by the courts by Judge Chip Johnson.

After a few months, the family finally agreed to place this extremely troubled child into the Children's Psychiatric Unit at the University of New Mexico Hospital. After months of work, Josh was released to a therapeutic foster treatment center in Albuquerque. While there, he was sexually abused by another young boy in the center. It was quite a while before anyone learned of this, though, and he had already moved into another setting before we found out. Josh was moved to a therapeutic foster treatment home in Belen, much to his parents' dismay. However, the setting was the best part of Josh's troubled life to this day. After many months, the provider and the therapeutic foster family began inquired about the possibility of adopting Josh. Everyone who knew Josh and his family were in full agreement that the worst possible outcome for Josh's success would be for him to return home, ever. With the parent's horrible emotional treatment of Josh, and refusal to get any assistance from anyone in order to learn more appropriate ways to parent, there was no hope for Josh's future within the family.

This simple inquiry caused the biological parents to begin to threaten and constantly harass the provider agency until the agency decided to remove Josh from the therapeutic treatment home in Belen to another provider in Roswell where Josh's family lived. This was against the wishes of the therapists, the foster family and myself, but the agency wanted to wash their hands of this very difficult family. The new foster family had to participate with visitation schedules with the biological family, which was extremely disruptive to Josh's progress and the therapeutic foster family was not able to work with Josh. His behaviors worsened.

Eventually, the second therapeutic foster family failed and Josh had to be moved to yet another setting. He was never placed in a family with children. Josh was also

now being educated in a building separate from all other children. He was well known to the school system as the most dangerous child in Roswell.

As Josh became older, his contacts with other children gave me concern that he would act out sexually toward another child if given the right opportunity. A psychological evaluation was ordered for Josh to determine his potential for sexually abusive behaviors toward other children. The psychologist determined that he posed no threat to others in that regard. However, I disagreed, and Josh was receiving therapy to address these concerns.

Within a few weeks of the evaluation, Josh was at a therapy session at a counseling office where the secretary's seven or eight year old son was playing in the waiting room while waiting for his mom to get off work. Josh was the last patient and the two boys ended up alone together in the men's restroom where Josh proceeded to sexually assault the young boy.

Josh was arrested and eventually placed in the New Mexico State Hospital in a program that I had recommended to the Judge. It was another excellent placement for Josh where he truly learned more appropriate behaviors and responded well with not only the staff, but with other boys from across the state that were very similar to Josh. He was there for a number of years, which was the only stable environment he had experienced since leaving his family's home at seven.

Shortly before Josh's eighteenth birthday, the hospital released him back to his parents. This was done with no notice to the schools, the mental health system in Roswell, or anyone else. Once a child lands in the criminal justice system, the rest of the systems in a state that are designed to work with such a child are completely disregarded.

Josh's family had not lived with Josh for over eleven years. He was quickly thrown out of the house and onto the streets of Roswell. He had nothing but the clothes on his back. I had no notice that any of this had occurred. I was with my children when we saw Josh on the street one day. We stopped to visit and see how he was doing. We were appalled. He was thin, hungry, dirty, sick and depressed. My children begged me to take him home, but I could not risk their safety for Josh.

My husband and I have tried for 4 years now to get help for Josh. We have him in an apartment and on SSDI and Medicaid. He can not work without intensive supported employment services, which he is not eligible for. He did not qualify for the Developmental Disabilities Waiver because his IQ is about 70, too high to be determined DD. His learning disabilities and inability to read or write well enough to fill out a job application still did not help him to qualify. We have accessed independent living centers, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Children Youth and Families Department, the Department of Health and the Human Services Department. No one can help.

Today, Josh remains in a little run down apartment. We have provided him with furniture and the necessities of living. He can not work, has no friends, walks for miles to get anywhere and is frequently beaten and robbed of coats, bikes or whatever he is in possession of. We at least have him in a place that is safe. He comes by our office and we take him grocery shopping and deliver him and his groceries to his apartment. We provide him with phone cards for his cell phone so he can call us if he needs us. We have tried to get him to get appointments with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, but he is unable to remember to keep his appointments. He needs someone with him to help him do the day to day living tasks, although he can manage to heat up food and clean his apartment to some degree.

Josh is the perfect example of why we need services for those who age out of the foster care system. He is a young man waiting for the next tragedy to happen to him. Our community has invested so much in this young man during his pre-eighteen years with high dollar therapy, therapeutic foster care, hospitalizations, and education. One could say it has been successful since he has never killed anyone and is not now in jail. That was what we most worried about when Josh was little. He has not abused a child since turning eighteen, and maybe he won't ever again. He has not stolen or injured anyone that we know of. But the state has failed Josh. He has potential, just as my daughter with Down Syndrome. With supported employment and assisted living, Josh's life after his sentence to the state hospital could have turned out completely different. He could be gainfully employed, healthy and most of all, not a danger to himself or others in this community.

In a recent trip to China, our delegation asked to see a home for children who have no families. We found that China is taking care of these children until they are gainfully employed. They do not release them from the "welfare house" until they have been educated and in a job where they can support themselves, and they must have a roof over their head. This is vastly different than here, where we release them to fend for themselves.

I think we in the United States of America can and should do better. If you need ideas on what to do, I would be happy to provide some.

If you have any questions or wish to discuss this further, please feel free to contact me. I truly wish I could have been there in person, but I did not know about this hearing until tonight when I was reviewing schedules regarding risk pool funding. Thank you for this opportunity to submit this information on this very critical issue.

Statement of Seattle University's Fostering Scholars Program, Seattle, Washington

The Fostering Scholars Program at Seattle University welcomes the opportunity to submit written testimony for the Committee Hearing on Children Who Age Out of the Foster Care System.

Seattle University

With just over 7,000 students, Seattle University is the largest independent university in the Northwest. With a 29 percent student of color population, it is also one of the most diverse universities in the West. Seattle University is guided by its mission:

Seattle University is dedicated to educating the whole person, to professional formation, and to empowering leaders for a just and humane world.

Through its Fostering Scholars Program, Seattle University supports one of the most underrepresented and underprivileged groups in higher education—youth who age out of the foster care system. In Washington State, where only three out of ten foster youth graduate from high school before emancipating from foster care and only 25 percent of foster youth enroll in a postsecondary program immediately after high school (*Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Performance Report*, 2005), the need for higher education to improve its outreach to and support of these students is obvious. By developing an integrated program of support for former foster youth at Seattle University, the Fostering Scholars Program works to improve the prospects of foster youth, and to transform the poor outcomes we often witness from children emancipating from our nation's foster care system.

Foster Youth and Higher Education

The nation's support of the growing population of youth in foster care is lacking by any measure and as a result, thousands of young people are not reaching the educational and life outcomes that they each deserve. The sobering statistics on former foster youth employment confirm the narrow scope of opportunity that awaits undereducated youth. In a recent study, within one year of emancipation, 43 percent of former foster youth were employed and 45 percent were looking for work. Of those employed 47 percent were making wages at or below the poverty line. The prospects for this group do not improve with time: at four years after emancipation, 50 percent of former foster youth were unemployed. (*Foster Youth Transition to Independence Study*, Office of Children's Administration Research, DSHS, 2004).

Despite these grim statistics however, there are many indications that these young people intrinsically understand the value of education. Their educational aspirations do not mesh with their record of low academic achievement. In one survey, researchers found that despite little promotion of college in the foster care system, more than half of all Washington foster youth surveyed had plans to obtain either a bachelor's or associate degree (*Foster Youth Transition to Independence Study*, Office of Children's Administration Research, DSHS, 2004). Nationally, foster youth face a similar predicament: high aspiration coupled with the reality of low achievement. Seventy percent of the 20,000 young adults who emancipate from foster care each year want to go to college. If we do not change the way we support the ambitions of former foster youth, the vast majority of our most vulnerable young people will never have the benefit of a college education.

Why Former Foster Youth Need Extra Support to Attend College

It is well documented that because they experience high rates of school instability and other risk factors associated with school failure (such as early childhood maltreatment and neglect and learning disabilities), foster youth often perform poorly in school and are rarely well prepared for college. As Burley and Halpern documented in a 2001 study of foster youth in Washington State, compared with non foster youth twice as many foster youth repeated a grade, changed schools during the year, or enrolled in special education programs (*Educational Attainment of Fos-*

ter Youth: Achievement and Graduation Outcomes for Children in State Care, Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2001). Of those foster youth exiting care in 2004, 35.4 percent received some type of special education services (*DSHS Performance Report*, 2005).

In addition to academic needs, foster youth also have unique social, emotional health needs. In their ten-year study of 479 foster care youth and review of 659 case records, Pecora and his colleagues report that a disproportionate number of former foster youth have clinical levels of depression, social phobia, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, or drug dependence. Overall, former foster youth are twice as likely as youth not in foster care to have mental health problems (Pecora et al, 2005).

Beyond the academic and health related barriers to obtaining a college education, there are several other unique barriers that arise for foster youth who aspire to attend college. For example, it is not uncommon for students who have aged out of foster care to become discouraged or drop out when their on-campus residence or dining facility closes for the holiday or summer break and they are left with nowhere to go. Understanding and addressing this and other complexities of a foster youth's life is critical for institutions of higher education who seek to promote college success for former foster youth.

Fostering Scholars Program

In June, 2006, Seattle University welcomed its first seven Fostering Scholars and will welcome four additional Scholars in 2007. Once on campus, scholarship recipients receive year-round room and board; full tuition and fees; health insurance; personal support; a program of cohort and leadership development; work-study jobs; access to tutoring, therapy and counseling as needed; and the benefit of an emergency fund. Students also receive guidance from the Fostering Scholars Director in accessing the myriad of student development programs on campus, ranging from Office of Multicultural Affairs programs to intramural sports and from student academic support services to community service opportunities. While enrolled at Seattle University, Fostering Scholars are expected to make progress toward a degree and the attainment of life and leadership skills needed for independent and fulfilled living.

Private donations and a generous grant from the Stuart Foundation, a national leader for children and youth, make these program components possible. Additionally, Seattle University's partnerships with state leaders in foster care advocacy, Treehouse and the College Success Foundation, are critical to the program's success. In order to create viable options in higher education for former foster youth, Seattle University is committed to forging community and governmental partnerships to help prepare foster youth for attending and graduating from college. Seattle University recognizes how important educational access is for all young people today, and is committed to making the college dream possible for the most vulnerable of our youth—those exiting the foster care system. The Seattle University Fostering Scholars Program urges Congress to affirm its commitment to children and youth in care by strengthening and expanding programs, such as the Education and Training Voucher (ETV), aimed at supporting the college aspirations of youth aging out of foster care.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a written statement on behalf of Seattle University's Fostering Scholars Program.

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