



Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies

TESTIMONY

of

The Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies

Before the

**New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Children and Families and the
Subcommittee on Foster Care**

Public Hearing on The Needs of Youth Aging out of Foster Care

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My name is Vani Sankarapandian and I am the Senior Policy Analyst for Early Childhood Education and Child Welfare at the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies (FPWA). For 85 years, FPWA has been a leading policy advocate for individuals and families served by our almost 300 member human service agencies and churches in and around New York City. FPWA promotes the social and economic well-being of greater New York's most vulnerable by strengthening human service organizations and advocating for just public policies.

I would first like to take this opportunity to thank the New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Children and Families and the Subcommittee on Foster Care for drawing much-needed attention to the roughly 1,400 youth who “age out” of the New York foster care system each year. There is a critical need to expand services aimed at helping these youth transition into adulthood. Unlike their peers, foster care youth who age out of the child welfare system have few supports and little to no adult or family guidance. They experience higher rates of mental illness, criminal activity, homelessness, and unemployment.¹ They are also subject to severe financial difficulties. According to a Chapin Hall study, a significant percentage of former foster youth surveyed did not have enough money for clothing (39.9%), rent (18.6%), utilities (17.4%), or phone service (22.1%).² Having accepted responsibility for these children, the government has a unique moral obligation to ensure that foster youth aging out of the system have the opportunities and supports they need to build successful lives as adults. FPWA calls upon New York State to make a commitment to meeting the health insurance and educational needs of older foster youth and to reducing the number of children who age out of the foster care system.

Automatically Extend Medicaid Coverage to Independent Foster Youth until Age 21

In addition to the challenges of completing the application process without any adult or family support, New York youth aging out of foster care are only eligible for Medicaid if their incomes are under the federal poverty level, which is far below a subsistence level for youth in many areas of the State. Automatic Medicaid eligibility until age 21 would guarantee that youth aging out of foster care have access to the medical services they need.³ According to a survey

¹ Mark Courtney, “Youth Aging Out of Foster Care,” Network on Transitions to Adulthood: Policy Brief, Issue 19, April 2005. Available at <http://www.transad.pop.upenn.edu/downloads/courtney--foster%20care.pdf>.

² Mark Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Gretchen Ruth, Tom Keller, Judy Havlicek, and Noel Bost, “Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19,” Chapin Hall Working Paper, May 2005.

³Note: Youth age out of the foster care system at age 18, but can remain in the system until age 21 if (1) they consent and (2) they are in school, college, regularly attending vocational or technical education or (3) are unable to live independently.

conducted by the American Public Human Services Association and published in 2007, seventeen states at the time of survey had enacted legislation to automatically extend Medicaid coverage under the federal Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, and five other states reported having plans to do the same.⁴

Health and mental health services are vital to youth leaving foster care in New York State, many of whom struggle with mental illness and trauma recovery. One study found that youth leaving care experience a higher rate of post-traumatic stress disorder than Vietnam and Iraq veterans.⁵ Research in New York City indicates that in 2000, more than half of youth in foster care suffered from mental health problems.⁶

Regular access to reproductive health services and prescription coverage are also crucial for this young adult population, which is at high risk for pregnancy. In one study of current and former foster care youth, over a third (37.4%) of women, age 19 at the time of the second interview, reported being pregnant at least once in the roughly two-year time period since the first interview.⁷

Lack of health care coverage can result in higher levels of costly emergency room and inpatient care, the progression of chronic disease, and thousands of dollars of medical debt, which can be devastating for foster youth attempting to establish independent lives once they have left the foster care system.⁸ Extending Medicaid eligibility until age 21 would assist foster youth aging out of care in accessing critical health and mental health services, while preserving their economic security.

Create a State-Funded Tuition Scholarship Program for Foster Care Youth Attending College in the SUNY or CUNY Systems

⁴ “Medicaid Access for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care,” American Public Human Services Association, 2007. The 17 states are AZ, CA, FL, IN, IA, KS, MA, MS, NV, NJ, OK, RI, SC, SD, TX, UT, and WY. The five states with plans to do so are MD, MO, NC, NM, and WI.

⁵ “Assessing the Effects of Foster Care: Mental Health Outcomes from the Casey National Alumni Study,” Casey Family Programs. Available at http://www.casey.org/NR/rdonlyres/CEFBB1B6-7ED1-440D-925A-E5BAF602294D/303/casey_natl_alumni_study_mental_health.pdf.

⁶ Freundlich, “Time Running Out: Teens in Foster Care,” Children’s Rights, Inc., Juvenile Rights Division of the Legal Aid Society and Lawyers for Children, 2003.

⁷ Mark Courtney, et al., *supra* note 2.

⁸ Benjamin Shors, “More like family: Bills aim to give hand up to teens who ‘age-out’ of child welfare system,” THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW, January 19, 2006. Available at http://www.spokesmanreview.com/tools/story_pf.asp?ID=112086.

Despite the demonstrated link between education and later success, former foster care youth struggle to access the same educational opportunities available to their peers. Foster youth who age out simply do not have the financial resources or family support, encouragement, and guidance that many children rely on as they advance through high school and contemplate options for higher education. While nearly two-thirds (64%) of former foster care youth in the Chapin Hall study had graduated from high school or obtained a GED, less than 12% were enrolled in a two or four-year college.⁹

The expense of attending college is out of reach for most foster care youth. In New York's public university system, tuition, fees, and living expenses at SUNY's four-year baccalaureate program adds up to over \$17,000 per school year.¹⁰ Although alternate sources of financial aid exist, students must obtain multiple awards to cover total college expenses. Foster care youth with any hope of affording a post-secondary education are forced to piece together numerous grants or take on loans, a process that can be extremely daunting without family help, guidance counselors, or the many other supports upon which non-foster youth rely. Even the maximum award amounts under tuition assistance programs like New York State's TAP, the Federal Pell Grant, the Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant, and Federal Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) are insufficient to cover tuition, fees, and living expenses in a degree-granting program. For instance, ETVs only provide *up to* \$5,000 per youth. Out of the 810 youth across the State who received an ETV award in FFY 2006-2007, 46% received awards of less than \$4,000.¹¹

Investing in post-secondary opportunities for foster youth will ultimately benefit the State. Research shows that workers with an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree experience less unemployment and earn higher wages than workers who have only graduated from high school. Nationally, the unemployment rate for high school graduates in 2006 was 4.3%, compared to 3.0% for workers with an associate's degree and 2.3% for workers with a bachelor's degree. As for wages, workers with a high school diploma could expect a 28.7%

⁹ Mark Courtney, et al., *supra* note 2.

¹⁰ "2007-08 Typical Expenses for Undergraduate Students at a SUNY College," The State University of New York. Living expenses include room and board (assumes SUNY student lives on campus), books and supplies, transportation, and personal expenses. Available at http://www.suny.edu/Student/paying_tuition.cfm.

¹¹ Data obtained from OCFS.

increase in earnings with an associate's degree and a 61.5% increase with a bachelor's degree.¹²

Seventeen states currently offer some form of education tuition waiver assistance to foster care youth.¹³ A State-sponsored tuition scholarship program in New York would allow foster care youth to eliminate cost as yet another barrier to their pursuit of higher education and a better life.

Invest in Subsidized Kinship Guardianship as an Alternate Permanency Option for Youth in Foster Care

In order to reduce the number of children who age out of the foster care system every year, we must do more to promote permanent living arrangements for foster youth. Even with medical, educational, and housing assistance, independent living for youth who age out is extremely difficult given the absence of family support. Subsidized kinship guardianship offers these youth another permanency alternative, permitting children in long-term care who are unable to return to their parents to exit the child welfare system into safe, stable living arrangements.

Research proves that kinship care works for children and families. Studies of relative foster care versus non-relative foster care show that children living with relatives are in stable family arrangements and experience fewer school or home placement changes. Children living with relatives are also more likely to maintain ties to community-based, cultural, and religious traditions, as well as siblings and extended family.¹⁴ The option of kinship guardianship is especially important for older youth and communities of color. In situations where their parents are unable to care for them, older youth who are difficult to place or who do not want to be adopted are at risk of simply aging out of the system. Kinship guardianship presents these youth with the opportunity for a stable placement and a caring relationship with an adult. In communities of color, including African American, Hispanic, and Native American communities,

¹² "Education and Training Pay," Postsecondary Education Opportunity. Available at <http://www.postsecondary.org/archives/Posters/EducationTraining.pdf>.

¹³ The states are: Alaska, Connecticut, Florida, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Maine, Minnesota, North Carolina, New Jersey, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and West Virginia.

¹⁴ Tiffany Conway and Rutledge Q. Hutson, "Is Kinship Care Good for Kids?," Center for Law and Social Policy, March 2, 2007; Leah Jacobs, Kimberly Lucas, Christy Moulin, Lauren Nadler, and Katherine Rollins, "Subsidized Guardianship in New England: An Analysis for Casey Family Services," April 23, 2006; "Time for Reform: Support Relatives in Providing Foster Care and Permanent Families for Children," The Pews Charitable Trusts, 2007.

kinship guardianship builds upon deeply embedded cultural norms which already support caregiving for children by extended family members.¹⁵

Adoption does not work for every family, and this is an important alternative for youth who might otherwise age out and relatives who are willing to provide stable care, but who are uncomfortable with legally dissolving the ties between parent and child. Furthermore, this could ultimately save money for the State. Although subsidized guardianship would provide kinship guardians with payments to help cover the costs of caregiving, the corresponding closure of the foster care case would eliminate administrative costs associated with continuous monitoring by the State.¹⁶ Most importantly, kinship guardianship would provide foster youth with the chance to build a strong, supportive relationship with an adult caregiver. The emotional support that comes with a permanent living arrangement is often the key to a young adult's ability to successfully navigate the pitfalls of growing up.

For these reasons, FPWA urges New York State to promote subsidized kinship guardianship as an alternate permanency option for foster care youth.

FPWA would like to thank you for recognizing the importance of the issues facing children aging out of the foster care system. We look forward to working with you to address the needs of these children over the next year. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jacobs, et al, *supra* note 14.