



616 H Street, NW · Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20001  
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949  
[www.childrenslawcenter.org](http://www.childrenslawcenter.org)

**Testimony before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Human Services  
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**Foster Youth Employment Amendment Act of 2012 Hearing**

**Sharra E. Greer  
Policy Director  
Children's Law Center**

Good morning Chairman Graham and members of the Council. My name is Sharra E. Greer. I am the Policy Director of Children's Law Center<sup>1</sup> (CLC) and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of CLC, the largest non-profit legal services organization in the District and the only such organization devoted to a full spectrum of children's legal services. Every year, we represent over 1,200 low-income children and families, including 500 children in foster care, dozens of children at risk of entering foster care, and several hundred foster parents and relatives of children in foster care.

CLC strongly supports the Foster Youth Employment Amendment Act of 2012 (B19-691). Older youth in foster care face tremendous hurdles on the path to adulthood. Far too many older foster youth must struggle to balance the demands of finishing high school, holding a part-time job, and learning to navigate the basics of the adult world without the benefit of a parent or committed adult who can help them open their first bank account, get their driver's license, or learn how to balance a budget. Although this legislation does not attempt to address the root causes of the difficulties that older foster youth face, it takes an important step toward increasing their opportunities as they move into adulthood.

Entering adulthood is a challenging time for most young people, but youth who have grown up in foster care confront additional obstacles as they embark on independence. Too many of the almost 700 DC foster youth between 16 and 21 live in group homes or independent living programs where even the most caring and committed staff cannot provide the level of consistent support that teenagers need.<sup>2</sup> Many older foster youth suffer after-effects of the abuse or neglect they endured as children that manifest in difficulty building healthy personal and professional relationships. As a result, older foster youth are at high risk of becoming pregnant as teenagers, abusing drugs and alcohol, and becoming incarcerated.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, these youth have tremendous potential. With appropriate support, most of them will flourish, going on to complete vocational school or college,

hold steady jobs, and raise healthy families. It is our responsibility as a city to provide these youth with the extra support that will allow them to thrive.

CLC recently represented a young woman whom I will refer to as Denise whose experiences illustrate the barriers that many foster youth face in obtaining employment and becoming self-supporting adults. When Denise was born, her mother was homeless and drug-addicted. Maternal relatives raised Denise, but she was removed from them when she was a teenager because of abuse. Beginning when she was 16, Denise moved from one group home to another, feeling alone and rejected. She was a dedicated student who loved reading and writing but as a high school junior she decided to get pregnant because she hoped that having a baby meant that there would finally be someone in her life who would never abandon her. To complete high school, she had to wake up before sunrise every day to take her daughter on the bus to daycare and then take another two buses to school. While she was finishing high school, her mother reappeared in her life seriously disabled. Denise took on the added responsibility of caring for her mother in addition to her daughter. Between caring for her mother and daughter, Denise barely had time to complete her schoolwork, but she managed to obtain her high school diploma at 20, becoming the first person in her family to graduate from high school. However, she has not been able to complete vocational training – her mother's health crises and her daughter's childhood illnesses caused her to miss too many days in her program – and she has not been able to find a job. Since she aged out of foster care, her small family struggles to survive on TANF and food stamps. She is a bright and personable young woman who would make a responsible and proficient worker. This legislation will help Denise and other young adults like her overcome the challenges of their difficult childhoods to become productive, independent adults.

The data shows that Denise's experience is all too common in DC and nationally. Only 77 DC foster youth, or approximately 1 in 5 of the 435 youth in care between 18 and 21, are currently

employed.<sup>4</sup> In FY 11, only 44 DC foster youth, or approximately 1 in 10 of the youth in care between 18 and 21, completed a vocational program at an accredited institution.<sup>5</sup> Only 107 foster youth, or approximately 1 in 4 of the youth in care between 18 and 21, are enrolled in college, and about two-thirds of those youth are not able to progress past freshman year.<sup>6</sup> 103 DC foster youth are teen mothers.<sup>7</sup> DC does not report data on the number of youth in care who obtain high school diplomas or GEDs, but our experience and national data suggest that the number is lower than the already low figures for non-court-involved youth in DC.<sup>8</sup>

This legislation represents an innovative approach to increasing employment opportunities for foster youth. In our research, we found only two states that had passed similar legislation, Texas in 2009 and California in 2011.<sup>9</sup> DC's proposed bill is more expansive than either of those laws, as the Texas law applies only to youth who have already aged out of care and the California law gives hiring preference only for internships and student assistantships, not permanent jobs. DC has long been on the cutting edge of providing support to older youth in care, extending foster care eligibility to 21 well before the Fostering Connections Act provided federal funding for such extensions.<sup>10</sup> This legislation confirms DC's commitment to ensuring that young people age out of foster care with the supports they need to overcome their early hardships. I do, however, caution that this legislation will be effective only if DC foster youth are able to obtain the basic skills necessary for employment. I know that increasing opportunities for older foster youth is a major priority for CFSA's new director, Brenda Donald, and I encourage this Committee to work with CFSA to ensure that the agency has sufficient funding to provide meaningful case management and supportive services to help older youth in care obtain the high school diplomas, GEDs, vocational certificates, and college degrees that will make them eligible for DC government jobs.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.

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<sup>1</sup>Children’s Law Center works to give every child in the District of Columbia a safe home, meaningful education and healthy life. As the largest nonprofit legal services provider in the District, our over 80-person staff partners with hundreds of pro bono attorneys to serve 1,200 at-risk children each year. Applying the knowledge gained from this direct representation, we advocate for changes in the city’s laws, policies and programs. For more information, visit [www.childrenslawcenter.org](http://www.childrenslawcenter.org).

<sup>2</sup> In FY 12 oversight answers, CFSA reported that 163 youth between 16 and 21 live in group homes or independent living programs. CFSA FY 2012 Performance Oversight Responses, Attachment Q\_data, “SVII Q46 Youth Ages 13-21-Goal.”

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., “Youth Who ‘Age Out’ of Foster Care: Troubled Lives, Troubling Prospects,” Child Trends Research Brief, Dec. 2002, available at [http://www.childtrends.org/files/Child\\_Trends-2002\\_12\\_01\\_RB\\_FosterCare.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/files/Child_Trends-2002_12_01_RB_FosterCare.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> CFSA FY 2012 Performance Oversight Responses, Q53(c). The oversight answers provide the number of CFSA youth who are employed without indicating their ages, but likely most youth who are employed are between 18 and 21.

<sup>5</sup>CFSA FY 2012 Performance Oversight Responses, Q53(a). The oversight answers provide the number of CFSA youth who are in vocational programs without indicating their ages, but likely most youth who are in vocational programs are between 18 and 21.

<sup>6</sup> CFSA FY 2012 Performance Oversight Responses, Q53(d). The oversight answers provide the number of CFSA youth who are in college without indicating their ages, but likely most youth who are in college are between 18 and 21. The oversight responses show that approximately 60 foster youth are college freshman, but only approximately 20 are college sophomores.

<sup>7</sup>CFSA FY 2012 Performance Oversight Responses, Q58.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Mason Burley & Mina Halpern, “Education Attainment of Foster Youth: Achievement and Graduation Outcomes for Children in State Care,” Nov. 2001, available at <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/rptfiles/FCEDReport.pdf>

<sup>9</sup>Texas – Tex. Gov’t Code § 672.002 (2012), CA – Cal Gov Code § 18220 (2012)

<sup>10</sup>The Fostering Connections Act (PL 110-3510) was passed in 2008 by the U.S. Congress.