

**Testimony by
MaryJane Dessables
Representing
James F. Purcell
Chief Executive Officer
Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies**

Before

**New York State Assembly Standing Committee
On Children and Families**

December 14, 2007

Good morning, I am MaryJane Dessables, Associate for Information and Analysis for the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA). COFCCA is the primary statewide membership organization for child welfare services providers, representing 110 not-for-profit agencies that contract with the New York City Administration for Children's Services and the county departments of social services to provide foster care, preventive services, adoption, and aftercare services as well as education for children on our facility campuses. Our member agencies serve over 98% of all children in foster care in New York City and 90% statewide.

On behalf of the thousands of vulnerable children and families served by the member agencies members of COFCCA, I thank this committee for your attention to the issues affecting the safety and well-being of the children of New York.

For this hearing, the committee has chosen a topic of great import to the foster care system—the “transition of youth aging-out of foster care”. Foster care agencies have always been deeply concerned with the futures of young people aging out of foster care, but that concern has deepened in recent years as opportunities for employment and housing for young people have diminished. There are many factors that must be examined in assuring that young people have a successful transition from foster care.

Who are the Young People Who Age-out of Foster Care?

We all agree that the time spent in foster care ought to be as short as necessary to ensure first the safety of the child, and then that the underlying child and family conditions which resulted in placement are remedied. For many children in foster care the length of stay is in fact a relatively short period in their lives. However, for a variety of reasons, some children and youth need to remain in foster care for a longer time, sometimes until they age out between ages 18 to 21.

The goal for almost all children entering foster care is return home to parent. Agencies consistently devote time and energy to providing the services needed for reunification,

but sometimes that is not possible. In such cases the goal is most often changed to adoption. Children with a goal of adoption tend to spend considerably longer time in care while their parental rights are terminated and a new home is found, which can be a lengthy process. When an adoptive home cannot be found, or when a placement fails, the time in care becomes even longer—often resulting in the child aging out of foster care.

A significant percentage of youth, nearly one fourth of all admissions, enter foster care as older teens, and despite efforts to resolve their family issues, they age-out of the system between 18-21. For all youth transitioning from foster care the question of what skills and supports are required, the extent to which youth are ready to access this help, and the details of achieving housing and employment is complicated by the needs of the individual. Our youth have in almost all cases been through long periods of trauma and have experienced failures in school and other settings. In many ways these are our most complex cases. It is critical that in each of these “cases” we always bear in mind that it is the life of a young person, and to a large extent for him or her, we offer the last, best hope of readiness for a successful future life as an adult.

Preparing Foster Youth for Adulthood

The reality that youth will age out of foster care and face life on their own led many decades ago to the creation of the Independent Living Programs, which have been enhanced and are now called “Preparing Youth for Adulthood” (PYA). These programs were developed to prepare youth for the eventuality of taking care of themselves. The teaching begins at age 14 and builds cumulatively up to age 21. The skills needed for youth to attain self-sufficiency were identified and codified into training programs and workshops that are delivered in a variety of ways at all agencies. Every agency has to present information on a range of subjects from personal hygiene, interpersonal skills, cultural issues, food management and nutrition, substance abuse prevention counseling, health and mental health, human sexuality, legal rights and responsibilities, recreation, socialization, transportation, finances and budgeting, and job readiness.

Youth also receive monthly stipends. Beginning at age 16, youth receive \$20 each month. The stipends are increased in increments of \$5 with each birthday, so that by the time the teen reaches 20, the stipend amounts to \$40 per month. The stipends were created as an opportunity to teach youth in foster care about spending and saving. This is an excellent idea, but the actual amount of money is inadequate. In most cases it does not allow for meaningful savings.

Yet, despite the availability and easy access to workshops, some youth resist participating in these skill sessions. Because of their experiences pre-placement, youth come to us with issues of trust that can lead them to challenge or reject the staff and programs available. It takes time to build relationships that overcome the barriers to learning in foster care. It always takes the personal attention of a social worker or caseworker to engage the youth in attending these highly beneficial programs. If that worker leaves the agency, it constitutes a set-back for the youth. But staff turnover continues to be a constant problem in foster care, due to the increasing demands and low salaries. And as seen in

the OCFS Workload Study issued in November 2006, multiple mandated casework demands prevent case workers and case planners from spending the majority of their time doing what they entered the field to do – interact with you and families. The 2006 study showed workers had as little as five hours per family per month to meet with the families and youth on their caseloads.

Providers of child welfare services want every young person aging out of foster care to have the pathways to success that we all want for our own children—a college education or preparation for meaningful employment and permanent connections to a caring and supportive family or individual. Young people in foster care are encouraged to stay in school and their progress is monitored. This can be very challenging. Many of the teens coming into foster care are under-educated, with long histories of school absences. Studies have shown that many are not likely to get their GED until they reach the age of 20. Foster care agencies focus much attention on helping teens in their care address their school problems, hiring tutors and paying for extra instruction. Education is a strong factor in the plan developed with youth when they enter care. But much time and personal attention are required to compensate for the lack of consistent schooling in the past.

Having seen too many examples of youth leaving foster care without benefiting from the preparation available to them, agencies have developed innovative ways to work with youth. Some agencies have developed incentives to encourage youth to attend skills sessions. One agency, Seamen's Society in Staten Island, hired a former foster youth to engage the teens currently in care. The agency offers points for each activity attended. The points add up to privileges such as a movie or other outing. Another agency, Graham-Windham, with programs in New York City and a campus in Westchester, from revamped its entire Independent Living Program based on the experience of a youth, who upon aging out at 21 found that he had no housing available. The agency developed a contract with each youth Preparing for Adulthood that specifies goals and necessary steps. G/W also opened a drop-in center that offers recreational and computer access to its young people. They are currently seeking funding to make it the “state of the art” facility dreamed of by their youth.

Another agency, Cardinal McCloskey Services offers Training Weekend Retreats twice a year, at which approximately 40 adolescents and 8-10 staff engage in discussions and recreation in a highly enjoyable way of developing life skills. Jewish Child Care Association offers theater arts and recreation programs to encourage self-expression and self-confidence. Their youth have mounted performances and produced videos of which they are extremely proud. You will hear today from yet another agency, Children's Village, which has developed a program that has become a national model for its unique WAY program's demonstrable success in working with foster youth.

These are just a few examples of the ways agencies are trying to engage the youth who will age-out of foster care. And it is making a difference.

Another important way in which agencies help youth prepare for the responsibility of

adulthood is by providing Supervised Independent Living Programs (SILPs), which are designed to allow more mature youth to live in their own apartments while they go to school and/or work, with a counselor checking on them but not living with them.

Moving On...

Time and support are necessary to sustain the youth in foster care if they are to go on to college and trade schools. Most youth in college do not graduate or finish job training by the time they are 21 and their foster care subsidy ends. The New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) has recognized this fact by allowing some youth still in college or in a training program to remain in their foster homes, while continuing the subsidy for the foster parent. Unfortunately, fewer youth are receiving this continued support in care.

Nearly all of the young people who age-out will need housing, continued access to health and mental health care, and employment assistance. The New York City Administration for Children's Services reported in 2006 that "of the approximately 1200 foster youth over age 18 leaving the foster care system, only 20% are leaving to be reunified with their families or adopted. The remaining 80% must rely primarily on themselves."

Housing

For those youth without the options of college or family, housing remains a dire need. Without transitional housing, City youth must immediately seek assistance from the New York City Housing Authority for a place to live. But even when an apartment is located, occupancy is not guaranteed. Too often delays in approving applications jeopardize apartments for which deposits cannot be produced within the requisite 10 days. In addition, applications for Section 8 are sometimes denied when criminal background checks turn up records of juvenile crimes.

Not even the young people who return to their families from foster care are exempt from this need. Too often their "permanent living arrangements prove temporary. When a family reunification disrupts, former foster youth need a place to live in a supportive environment. Currently, there are only a handful of programs that provide housing and a variety of on-site supports for young people who have aged-out of foster care, but there is a need for far more.

All of the existing supportive housing programs have been created through a combination of government and private monies. They offer young people who have suffered displacement and trauma a necessary transition to living on their own. You may already know about the excellent program created and operated by Good Shepherd Services called the Foyer.

Another outstanding program is offered by the foster care agency, St. Vincent's Service, that created an "After 21- College Program" in which they support approximately 20 youth who are in college or in a trade school when their foster care status ends. These

youth are no longer in foster care, but the agency feels an on-going responsibility to support these youth. They can live in a group home residence, where they are assisted by staff in meeting their emotional, physical health, and developmental needs. They can remain in the program until age 25. They are all linked to employment or graduate schools if they qualify. Funding for this program is almost entirely private and must be raised annually to guarantee its continued availability to the young people who so desperately need it.

Like most foster care agencies, St. Vincent's has seen foster youth reunified with their families, or adopted, only to turn up again at the agency within six months to a year. The same issues that resulted in the youth coming into care often re-surface after some time at home. Tragically, youth who have been discharged home may later become homeless or "couch crashers" due to the return of family tensions. And even some adoptions of teens disrupt and leave young people searching for other homes and connections.

For these youth, many agencies may offer informal assistance or provide a structured program such as St. Vincent's "Safety Net" for youth over age 18. Some will refer youth to the programs subsidized by ACS to work with youth who've become homeless after foster care. Other foster care agencies, like Cardinal McCloskey Services, are in the process of seeking funding to create scatter-site housing for the young people leaving foster care.

For Cardinal McCloskey, as for the other foster care agencies, recent access to the State's After Care funding from ACS has enabled them to expand their services to young adults aging-out of care. It has also sharpened their understanding of the need for services beyond the age limits of foster care.

"The reality is that it is the rare 18-21 year old who can live on his/her own without the financial and emotional backing of an extended support network." Cardinal McCloskey Services

The importance of bridging the ages of 21 to 25 is also evidenced by the experience of the supportive housing unit known as Schaffer Hall under the auspices of the Lantern Group. This residence for young people aged out of foster care has been in operation since 2001, and their average length of stay in their 25-units is two and a half years. At that point, young people seem ready for living on their own.

Medical Coverage

When youth are discharged from foster care, it is essential that they have continued medical coverage. The Medicaid coverage that applies to youth while they are in foster care ends when they leave care. Young people leaving foster care need access to health services, many depend on medication and treatment for various health and mental health problems. Approximately 20 states have enacted laws to ensure that youth discharged from foster care at 18 maintain Medicaid coverage until age 21. New York's vulnerable youth should be guaranteed at least that continued coverage.

The problems of transitioning from foster care are especially difficult for the significant number of young women who are pregnant or parenting. According to a study by the New York City Public Advocate in 2005, nearly one in six young women between the ages of 14 to 21 was a mother or expectant. The current foster care system does not have enough specialized settings for these young women, nor enough training for them and for the foster parents in whose homes they reside.

While many agencies have creative approaches to helping the youth in their care prepare and transition to adulthood, there is still no system-wide safety net.

In order to improve the outcomes for all youth exiting foster care, COFCCA recommends the following:

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Ensure Medicaid coverage for youth aging out of foster care up age 21, or longer if possible. We appreciate and support Assemblyman Scarborough's efforts to continue coverage until age 23, but recognize that federal support only allows coverage until age 21.
- Allow youth leaving foster care prior to age 21 the right of return so that they can access Preventive Services. (Preventive Services are designed to prevent placement in Foster Care and address needs of parents and families – needs that are very similar to what older youth living independently have.
- Provide Aftercare funding so that foster care agencies can use it to provide services for youth aging out of foster care. Provide this support for longer periods of time and allow youth to “come back” to Aftercare as needed.
- Initiate monthly stipends to youth in foster care beginning at age 14.
- Add a yearly cost of living increase to the stipends, which have not been increased in more than a decade.
- Support more internship and apprenticeship opportunities for foster youth, especially in the building trades and other areas that could lead to marketable job skills.
- Support additional foster care staff for the youth who need one-on-one assistance.
- Identify a liaison for each agency to expedite housing applications.
- Improve communication between the New York City Housing Authority and ACS to ensure that housing applications are expedited and apartments are secure.

- Review Criminal Background checks that reveal juvenile criminal records to determine whether the crimes should be used to invalidate eligibility for Section 8 Housing.
- Improve coordination between ACS and other related agencies, such as Department of Health, Board of Education, Office of Mental Health to ensure better services to youth aging out of foster care.