



Leadership, voice and vision for child welfare in New York State

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED TO
THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL
COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE
AND
COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION
OVERSIGHT HEARING – HIGHER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES
FOR YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE
Wednesday, December 13, 2017

Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies

Greetings, Chairperson Stephen Levin, Chairperson Inez Barron, and members of the New York City Council General Welfare and Higher Education Committees. The Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, also known as COFCCA, represents over fifty New York City child welfare agencies, organizations that provide foster care, juvenile justice and child maltreatment prevention services to many thousands of families. Our members range from large multiservice agencies to small community-based preventive services programs in community districts throughout the city. All of our members, regardless of size, work to assist children, youth and families to maximize their potential and join in what makes New York City great.

We need not explain to either of your two committees the benefits of higher education and how it relates to measures of adult self-sufficiency such as employment. Older youth who are in foster care or have aged out of foster care deserve the opportunity to get a higher education, but often face numerous barriers. Some of these obstacles are the general obstacles faced by low-income families, such as affording costs (tuition, school supplies, books, room and board). Other stumbling blocks are specific to foster youth, such as needing housing, income, and, most especially, the kind of support upon which students with well-functioning families can already rely.

While the recent New York State Excelsior Scholarship provides tuition for low-income students, it does not supply funding for books, supplies, or room and board. It also requires students enroll for twelve credits per



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semester and complete 30 credits per year, which can be difficult for aging-out foster youth, who have myriad other responsibilities and worries. New York State also offers Education Training Voucher grants for federal funding-eligible youth that can be applied to tuition, room and board, books and supplies, and a computer, for a maximum of \$5,000 per year. What these two state programs do not provide is the “soft support” a youth or young adult needs to succeed in college – supports such as tutoring or mentoring, a place to spend college breaks, a person who is invested in a youth’s success enough to provide the encouragement and sometimes necessary straight-talking that keeps struggling students in school. As found in the recent Center for the Study of Social Policy study, “Transformation Relationships for Youth Success,” young people themselves will tell you overcoming problems and achieving success can be traced back to “an individual worker who believed in them; kept showing up even when they were in trouble; challenged them to make better decisions without judging them” – the non-material supports that we who are parents recognize we have provided our own children. COFCCA has been on the steering committee of the Fostering Youth Success Alliance (FYSA), which has been advocating for these soft supports for foster youth statewide.

At the City level, the CUNY/ACS fostering College Success Initiative provides residential support with wrap-around services including tutoring and mentoring; nonprofits like our member agency, The New York Foundling, provide these services under contract with ACS. This program is scheduled to serve 200 students a year by FY20. CUNY also offers the Start/ASAP Foster Care Initiative to streamline admissions to the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs at eight city schools. Students receive support with the financial aid process, applying for waivers, transportation, transition support, and paid internships. The program plans to serve a total of 325 youth over four years with funding from the Hilton Foundation. Please note that we are limited to providing information regarding the programs’ plans, but not information regarding actual services delivered thus far. We have not seen city-wide data on how many youth have received which services, and we ask the Committee to encourage CUNY to make this data publicly available.



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These financial and non-financial supports are a good start, but they are limited in duration and in the number of youth they serve. While the city’s foster care numbers are down, 444 youth left ACS’ care in “non-permanency discharges” in the past year (ACS November 2017 Flash Report); we can assume many of these youth aged out of care and some percentage are youth who could benefit from higher education assistance. Additionally, youth with foster care histories have, by definition, trauma histories; almost daily, new studies show the effects of trauma on brain development, decision-making, and other cognitive skills. Youth at the edge of adulthood *without* foster care histories often struggle to navigate the transition to independence, and past trauma makes it even more difficult for our youth. Nationally, of the foster youth who graduate high school, only 20% enroll in college and only 2-9% attain a bachelor’s degree (Foster Care to Success, *Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care*, Jan 2014). If we are to move the needle on these numbers, we need to provide the supports that ensure these students have secure housing, sufficient financial resources, appropriate educational services when necessary, and perhaps most importantly the moral support, advice and encouragement they need to stay in school when it feels difficult for them to do so.

We at COFCCA would be happy to respond to any questions the Council members may have, or to arrange for members to see their local child welfare agencies in action. We thank you for allowing us to submit our testimony.

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