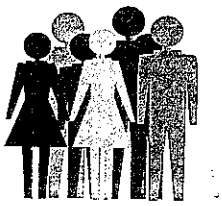
In The Spirit Of The Children, Inc.
Empowering Children & Families, Preserving Communities



New York City Council
General Welfare Committee
On
Housing for Youth Aging –Out of Foster Care
Tuesday, February 26, 2008

In the Spirit of the Children opened its doors in the winter of 2003 as the only existing community-based non-residential program serving exclusively youth, 18 to 23 who have aged out of foster care in the five boroughs of New York, to live on their own. Our purpose is to prepare young people transitioning out of foster care for adulthood. We assist young people exiting the foster care system with life development, individualized coaching and experiential learning necessary, to avert homelessness and promote self-reliance. We want to thank the City Council for inviting In the Spirit of the Children to participate in the hearing today on the issue of housing as it relates to youth aging-out of child welfare in New York City.

In the Spirit of the Children, Youth Transition Empowerment Program continues to experience growth in the number of youth referred for services.

In the past nine months, there have been a number of new initiatives and efforts out of the Administration for Children Services, the latest involves the shifting of the housing subsidy responsibility to the contract agencies. The contract agencies will now be responsible for the front loading of the 1,800 to 3,600 dollars per youth who are aging out into their own apartments; this will also apply to families who are being reunited with their children. Our concern is that the directive does not address or outline specific guidelines as to how this is to be carried out. For instance what will be the timeframe for the individuals searching for housing before he/she no longer qualifies? The current standard for a young person is up to six months after discharge? Will the contract agencies have discretion, and reduce the amount below the current maximum level 1,800 for (1) months rent and security as well as the furniture portion of the additional 1,800?

104 East 126th Street • Suite 4D • New York, NY 10035
P: 212-410-9801 • F: 212-410-9804 • www.spiritofthechildren.org

Another concern is will the agencies now begin to flood the YTEP program in an effort to avoid paying out the subsidy by noting that once the young person is discharged, if he/she had not obtained an apartment the agency is no longer responsible to assist them financially? In this case who will reimburse YTEP? There have been cases where we have frontloaded the security and the first months rent? In 2007 we aided 2 such young people in instances where the agencies had either dropped the ball and had not secured a housing subsidy approval through ACS prior to the young person 21st birthday or the timeline for the young person to receive the assistance had lapsed. The other concern is the lack of follow-through on behalf of service providers such as the discarding of housing applications, the lack of completing and receiving approval of a housing subsidy. Will there now be time constraints on the Housing Subsidy (one-Shot Deal).
Who will be responsible when a young person is referred to an After Care Program?

It has also been noted that ACS has issued a (1) page listing of housing resources to the agencies, in this document it references HPD housing as a resource. Please note that many of the target population do not meet the income requirements for housing under HPD. Further, prospective tenants for HPD housing are selected through lottery.

With regard to NYCHA and Section (8) applications, I would like to stress the importance of ensuring that the applications of the youth and families are submitted in a timely matter. Also there is concern particularly with those who are issued Section 8 vouchers and are also eligible for the Housing Subsidy as there are a number of circumstances that can delay a person in securing Sect 8 apartments and that may cause the recipient to exceed the time limit imposed on receiving the ACS housing subsidy. Further, in light of the proposed budget cuts coming out of Washington to HUD and particularly Section 8 funding, it is imperative that this population is prioritized in receiving this assistance.

In the Spirit of the Children, submit to the New York City Council and the Administration for Children Services to consider the following:

The Reunification Efforts of Older Youth in Care:

Instances where these youth who are 18 to 21 who have been return to parent if the young person has filed a housing application prior to his/her return to parent they lose the ACS housing priority code through NYCHA and forfeit any viable assistance from ACS.

In the Spirit of the Children would appreciate the consideration of the State, City and the Administration of Children Services to recognize the YTEP program in affording us housing applications to assist the young people who are

referred/and received into YTEP 4 to 6 weeks prior to aging out and housing applications were not yet filed. We are seeking to coordinate efforts on behalf of the youth with ACS and NYCHA in allowing us to aid in the completion and submission of housing applications with the ACS priority code for housing. Further, instances where we have frontload the funding to aid youth in securing apartments we would appreciate being reimbursed moving forward.

We appreciate the New York City Council and its member's consideration of continued and increased funding of our efforts to service the young people transitioning from foster care and those reuniting with their families.

In the Spirit of the Children thanks you in advance!

New York City Council

Hearing General Welfare Committee

On

Housing and Youth Aging Out

Tuesday, February 26, 2008

My name is Shameek McDonald and I am 21 years old .I aged-out in October of 2007 was a part of the New York City foster care system for a period of ten years. During my time in foster care I have experienced many problems that were of not my own doing, but my foster care agency. For example, before my 21st birthday I was in the application process of NYCHA to get an apartment. I was supposed to submit my pay-stubs to NYCHA so, that they can do a computation based on my income.

However at the time I had just started a new job so I only had one (1) pay-stub to submit at the time. I was told that I needed more pay-stubs in order to finish my housing application. I had completed everything else that I needed for housing besides this one component. During the same time my caseworker at the foster care agency had changed. Meanwhile the agency received important time sensitive notice from NYCHA, and the agency did not inform me prior to the application deadline. When I did submit my information to NYCHA had canceled my application. That was the end of my housing prospects.

I would like to thank you for providing me with this opportunity to speak before the council. I hope that the council finds this testimony helpful.

City Council General Welfare and Youth Services Committees
NYC Administration for Children's Services Written Testimony
Lorraine Stephens, Deputy Commissioner for Family Permanency Services
February 26, 2008

Good morning Chair de Blasio, Chair Fidler, and members of the General Welfare and Youth Services committees. I am Lorraine Stephens, Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Family Permanency Services at the New York City Administration for Children's Services and to my left is Acting Assistant Commissioner Dominique Jones who leads the Office of Youth Development within my division. We thank you for the opportunity to share our work related to the prevention of homelessness among youth transitioning from foster care. We believe that working to resolve this issue is paramount and are encouraged by your interest and advocacy for this population.

As you are aware, Children's Services is responsible for providing child protective, foster care, preventive and publicly funded child care and Head Start services to families in New York City. The Division of Family Permanency Services works directly with the 34 agencies contracted to provide foster care services to children and young people. Family Permanency Services establishes practice standards that each of our providers must meet in caring for the more than 16,000 children living in foster care. These standards include our efforts to support young people ages 14 to 21 prior to their discharge from care.

Children's Services is responsible for overseeing the care of a young person from the time that he or she is removed from his family and placed into foster care, until that child leaves care. While federal funding for foster children ends when a young

person turns 18 or 19 (depending on when that young person graduates from high school), Children's Services and our foster care agencies will continue to provide services to youth until they turn 21 if the young person chooses to remain in care after the age of 18. Children's Services requires foster care agencies to make diligent efforts to identify a viable discharge resource for every young person who leaves care, and whenever possible a permanent connection to a family is our ultimate goal.

While approximately 60 percent of our young people ages 14 through 21 are discharged to permanency each year – either through reunification or adoption – there are many youth for whom discharge to a caring adult is not possible. As a system, Children's Services and our provider agencies are making every effort to ensure that young people leave our care with housing, employment, educational opportunities, access to health services, and other supports that will ease their transition and provide them with stability as they mature. However, with all of these resources in place, Children's Services understands that young people who leave foster care to their own responsibility are at-risk for unemployment, early parenting and involvement with the criminal justice system, any of which might lead a young person to seek shelter. For this reason, we have set out to understand the scope of foster youths' interaction with the homeless system and have used this information to take steps to prevent this outcome for all of our young people in care.

Two Populations at Risk

We believe that there are two distinct populations that enter the shelter system – those young people currently in foster care who leave their placements without permission, and those young people who have been discharged from care but who

have limited skills and resources to navigate the challenges of adulthood. I would like to discuss what we know about these populations and the work we have underway to change the course of these young people's lives.

Youth Currently in Care in DYCD Shelter

Our colleagues at the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) reported that in FY 2007 approximately 193 young people ages 16 to 21 who were in foster care at the time, entered their crisis shelters. This number is approximately 8% of their entire population for that year. Although at this time there is no specific data that support the reasons why these young people entered DYCD shelters, our work with runaway youth tells us that many young people leave their placement because their individual needs have not been met.

Children who run from placement are at great risk of victimization and exploitation. Many do not perceive the inherent risks or see themselves as potential victims while they are away from care. While missing, youth at times seek refuge in dysfunctional or even dangerous situations, placing them at significant risk of delinquency, homelessness and exploitation. At other times, they connect with potential resource families such as bio family, relatives, and adult friends. It is important that Children's Services and its provider agencies concentrate our efforts to locate and engage these youth; transitioning them from dysfunctional settings to safe ones and reinforcing permanency when they have linked with potential resource families.

To respond to the needs of our youth in care, Children's Services has employed several strategies that will help to engage young people who are at risk of running away from their foster care placement. First, under our system-wide initiative

called *Improved Outcomes for Children*, which is currently in its first phase involving nine foster care agencies, we have instituted a Family Team Conference model that creates an opportunity for young people over the age of ten to participate in the decision-making about their lives. In these conferences, young people are engaged in discussions about their needs and in identifying resources for placement so that the system can proactively support them and help them to remain stable in their foster care placement. Since the fall of 2007, Children's Services has conducted 1,197 family team conferences. We have been successful in preserving the foster care placements of 39% of those children who participated in these conferences, providing additional supports in the foster home. Children's Services has also supported youth in a family based setting when they needed to move in 51 % of these cases.

Children's Services' Office of Youth Development is strengthening its relationship with our partners at DYCD's *Runaway and Homeless Youth Division* to better support young people who leave foster care and seek shelter from DYCD. Through this interagency collaboration, Children's Services and DYCD are working together to build capacity at youth shelters to work with young people who have left foster care and provide training to shelter staff on Children's Services' policies and practice in working with this population. This work has helped to clarify the responsibilities of the foster care providers in locating and re-placing these young people in settings that meet their individual needs.

In addition, our Office of Youth Development is available to work with shelter providers by assisting program staff and other stakeholders with strategies to engage these young people and helping them access resources to provide long-term

stability. These resources include supportive housing, transitional medical services and most importantly connections to caring adults.

As Children's Services' and DYCD's partnership grows stronger, our work will deepen. We expect to conduct more intensive data sharing that will aid in building our practice with youth at-risk of leaving care and developing comprehensive strategies to support young people who show up in the DYCD shelter system. As well as strengthen our own programs to understand what youth are running from.

Former Foster Youth in DHS Shelter

In addition to those youth still in care who enter DYCD shelter, we are equally concerned about those who enter the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) shelter system after exiting the foster care system. We need to better understand who these young people are and what circumstances lead them to DHS' door. We have initiated this work by examining a cohort of young people age 16 and over who were discharged from foster care in 2004. From this sample, we have found that:

- 11 percent entered the shelter within two years of discharge; and an additional 5 percent have used shelter to date. Less than one percent appeared in shelter within a month of discharge from foster care.
- Females were more than twice as likely to enter family shelter as males.
- Youth discharged from foster care between the ages of 20 and 21 were most likely to enter the single adult shelter system, as opposed to family shelter.
- Youth who were adopted from foster care were least likely to enter the shelter system.

This data helps us to confirm some of the basic facts that we already know: we must work with young people in foster care early on before they are planning to leave the system; permanent connections to stable, caring adults who are willing and able to support young people as they transition to adulthood are essential to the success of young people; and young people need support in developing skills and accessing resources to help them secure a job, obtain housing and pursue educational opportunities. From this data we will work to target vulnerable populations and identify the individual needs of our young people and strategies that may help us to better equip each and every young person with resources and skills that they need to secure permanent and stable housing.

Preparing Youth for Adulthood

Understanding that permanency and youth development are key to achieving positive outcomes for young people in foster care is exactly why we launched *Preparing Youth for Adulthood*, our strategy to better prepare adolescents in care so that when they leave care they have necessary resources and the skills that they need to make a successful transition into adulthood.

In our work through PYA, we are taking a deep look at what services and supports we can provide to young people to meet their individual needs around factors that impact their outcomes – like education, employment, personal responsibility, financial management, housing, and physical and mental health. I would like to outline a few achievements to illustrate our progress in implementing PYA.

Stable Housing

Critical to preventing a young person from entering into shelter is ensuring that they can access stable and affordable housing. Children's Services' Housing Services and Supports Unit works with young people to help them to secure housing assistance in three areas. First is NYCHA public housing, second is section 8 and third is ACS's Housing Subsidy. Young people in foster care whose long term plan is Another Planned Placement Living Arrangement are eligible for ACS Housing Subsidy, which includes support for security deposit and first month's rent, furniture and rental assistance. In recent months, Children's Services has made significant progress in our work to assist young people in accessing these resources. Our accomplishments include:

- Obtaining access to NYCHA's computerized tracking system to help us monitor the progress of housing applications and identify and address delays in processing.
- Implementing a computerized tracking system to better monitor the progress of a young person's application for subsidized housing and ensure follow-up on all clients seeking assistance.
- Easing access to Children's Services Housing Subsidy by reducing bureaucratic delays that cause youth to forfeit housing which has reduced processing time from eight weeks to approximately 72 hours.
- Developing a series of one-page desk aides for caseworkers, law guardians, youth advocacy groups, DYCD, housing coordinators, and PYA coordinators describing the application process and procedures for the Section 8 housing program and NYCHA public housing.

- Ensuring that each adult with whom a young person comes into contact has accurate and complete information about their eligibility for housing resources.

Young people leaving the foster care system face challenges in obtaining affordable and safe housing for a number of reasons including: limited resources, prohibitive approval criteria and processes, and lack of available options to meet the specific needs of our young people. Understanding this, Children's Services continues efforts to engage partners in the City and the State to tackle these barriers and to create an array of housing options for young people leaving the system to their own care.

Children's Services is excited about the launch of NY/NY III, a City and State supportive housing initiative that has made 200 beds available for young people who meet the sole criteria of having transitioned from foster care, with another 200 beds available for youth leaving the system who meet Severe Persistent Mental Illness (SPMI) criteria. We expect that approximately half of these units will come on line by the close of FY 2008 and the other half will be available in FY 2009.

In addition, the Community Development Corporation, Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement has dedicated 26 apartments in an 80-unit building, financed with Low Income Housing Tax Credits, for young people transitioning out of foster care. This initiative will demonstrate how best to support the integration of youth transitioning from care in non-supportive housing.

We are excited about these new resources that will assist many of our youth and we believe that collaborations to support these very vulnerable young adults will

be key to our success in providing much needed resources and support to our young people. Nevertheless, we know that these resources are limited and as such Children's Services hopes to forge stronger relationships with organizations and programs to help us expand our capacity to appropriately house and support our young people leaving care and ultimately reduce their risk of homelessness.

Permanent Connections to Caring Adults

At this time, approximately 3,879 or 62% of youth in foster care ages 14 to 21 are placed in a family-based setting, which is the direct result of Children's Services efforts to reduce the agency's over-reliance on the use of residential care for adolescents. We believe that in a group setting young people build resistance to the idea of a family and adopt behaviors that make it more difficult for them to successfully engage with caring adults and ultimately achieve a positive permanent connection. For this reason, we have emphasized family-based placements as the first option for all young people in care and work to move youth whenever it is in their best interest from a group setting to a foster home placement, as these home environments are the most appropriate settings for young people to be and grow.

As I discussed earlier in this testimony, Children's Services has launched a new Family Team Conference model, which has been critical to our success in reducing the use of residential care for teens. This model engages young people, family members, community members and others to meet with agency staff on a regular basis to discuss a young person's needs and to collectively develop plans for services and for the young person's future. These conferences will begin at the time that a young person enters foster care and will occur continuously throughout the time that the child is in care. We see these conferences as clear gateways to permanency for our young people as they will enable youth and those who care for

them to work together to determine who are the permanent connections in a young person's life, and how the system can support them and provide stability after discharge from foster care.

While we know that not all young people will achieve permanency through adoption or reunification prior to their discharge from foster care, it is incumbent upon us to provide every opportunity for young people to forge positive relationships with caring adults. Children's Services' Central Mentoring Office is currently working with 22 foster care agencies who offer mentoring programs serving 900 young people living in foster care. Mentors support young people in pursuing post-secondary education and seeking employment, they also serve as role models which can encourage positive behavior for our young people. Children's Services seeks to expand mentoring opportunities so that every young person in foster care who wants one, especially adolescents without a permanent connection to a caring adult, has the opportunity to benefit from a mentoring relationship.

Education, Employment and Ongoing Needs

Children's Services believes that in order to prevent young people leaving our system from entering the homeless system, we must ensure that these young people develop the skills and experience necessary to compete for living-wage jobs that enable them to secure and maintain housing. To accomplish this, young people need support to navigate the complex job market, and they must be encouraged and supported in pursuing secondary and post-secondary education.

We believe that by staying in school, our young people have the best opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills to meet the demands of the ever-changing

employment sector. To this end, we have made the following achievements in our work to provide educational and employment support for young people in foster care:

- Children's Services has worked with the Department of Education (DOE) to provide access to DOE databases to our foster care agencies, which will allow foster care caseworkers to access a young person's school records, monitor their progress in school, and prevent disruptions in education as a result of any changes in their care.
- We have partnered with the City University of New York (CUNY) to offer college preparation and other academic enrichment services to young people who hope to pursue post-secondary education.
- We are currently connecting approximately 500 young people each year to Education and Training Vouchers, which are Federally funded grants, to youth in foster care who are attending accredited post-secondary institutions.
- Our non-profit partner, New Yorker's For Children, is providing approximately 300 youth in college and vocational programs with Back-to-School packages which include laptop computers and gift cards for books, supplies and other college essentials.

Through various partnerships with the philanthropic community and City, State and Federal government agencies, Children's Services has worked to provide employment opportunities to young people living in foster care. In 2007 alone, we engaged approximately 700 young people in care in workforce development programs.

We have learned through our analysis of those young people ages 20 and 21 who are about to leave the foster care system that approximately 40% have experienced

employment or are currently employed. However, most of these young people are in low-wage, service industry jobs, which are most vulnerable to the changing economic cycles and ultimately leave young people at risk for poor outcomes. Understanding this, Children's Services will uphold practice standards that require foster care providers to keep youth engaged in school so that they may be better prepared with the skills necessary to obtain competitive jobs and at the same time provide support to help young people maintain employment.

Finally, I am excited to announce two important new resources to assist our young people in accessing services that will better prepare them for the transition to adulthood. On February 11, Children's Services, Youth Communication and New Yorkers For Children launched a new web site geared toward young people in foster care. This web site connects young people to resources and offers anecdotes from other youth in care about their experiences and their success. This tool will also be a resource to adults who care for our young people and help them to support youth in accessing services and becoming responsible adults. In addition, we have developed a palm card for our young people to promote the resources available through this web site and across the system, as well as the principles of *Preparing Youth for Adulthood.*

Conclusion

As you have heard, Children's Services has embarked on a path that we believe will better equip young people with the support and resources they need to achieve stability as they leave foster care. We understand that despite the accomplishments that we have made to date, there is still much work to be done to improve our work to support young people and begin to prepare them well before they leave our system in order to prevent them from entering into homelessness. Our ever-

changing economy is one that the most skilled and prepared citizens are often challenged by and as such, a young person leaving care with no guidance, support or preparation would have a difficult time navigating and succeeding. For this reason, we must all work together to find new ways to support our City's most vulnerable young people and ensure that all youth leave foster with the resources they need to mature and grow into productive citizens.

Again, thank you Chair de Blasio and Chair Fidler for providing Children's Services with this opportunity to discuss this critical issue and our work to tackle it thus far. My colleagues and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.

COVENANT HOUSE NEW YORK
460 WEST 41ST STREET, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10036 • (212) 613-0300

Testimony of Georgia Boothe, Associate Executive Director
before
The General Welfare Committee and the Youth Services Committee
on the Subject of:
Oversight - Examining DYCD's and ACS' Efforts to Prevent Youth Aging out of Foster Care from Becoming Homeless

(February 26, 2008)

I would like to thank the General Welfare Committee and the Youth Services Committee for providing the opportunity to testify here today. My name is Georgia Boothe. I am Associate Executive Director for Covenant House New York.

Covenant House New York is the nation's largest, privately funded, non-profit adolescent care agency serving homeless, runaway and at-risk youth. Last year, Covenant House New York served over 7,000 young people, primarily between the ages of 16 and 21, in our residential and community-based programs, and through our street outreach efforts.

Thirty percent of the youth sheltered at Covenant House New York, during the past year, had a history of foster care placement. Most of these young adults lacked a high school education or GED, were unemployed, and lacked adequate food, shelter, clothing and health care services. They were clearly unprepared for independent living. Most disturbing about this is that, despite legislation, regulations, and agency plans put in place over the past ten years, all of which were intended to help youth in foster care successfully transition to independent living, we continue to see a significant number of youth at our shelter who were inadequately prepared and unsuccessful in making this transition.

In January of this year, Senators John Kerry (D-Mass) and Patty Murray (D-Wash.) introduced the Reconnecting Youth to Prevent Homelessness Act (S.2560). Noting that many foster children currently end up being homeless as adults, the bill would provide additional "support to foster families, foster children and youth transitioning from the foster care system into adulthood."[1] We support this legislation and hope that the City Council will likewise express their support for this bill. But this legislation and other legislative efforts can not effectively address the issues of the hundreds of youth aging out of foster care without effective action and interaction by and between City and State Agencies working in cooperation and collaboration with private agencies.

Currently, youth exiting the foster care system do not have access to affordable, appropriate, safe and supportive housing options. On June 21, 2007, in a hearing before the General Welfare Committee and Youth Services Committee, ACS Deputy Commissioner Jeanette Ruiz, in response to questions asked in connection with her testimony, indicated that of the 1200 youth who aged out of foster care, only 300 obtained Section 8 vouchers or housing through NYCHA, and there was no accounting for the remaining 900 youth. On December 14, 2007, at a hearing before the New York State Assembly Standing Committee On Children And Families and The New York State Assembly Subcommittee On Foster Care, testimony was provided by ACS, Deputy Commissioner, Lorraine Stephens, that for FY 2007, 242 youth, or 28% of those who applied, obtained NYCHA housing, and 74 youth, or 8% of those who applied, received Section 8. Again, no account was given for the nearly 900 youth who did not obtain either NYCHA housing or a Section 8 voucher. Covenant House and other agencies who

[1] "Murray, Kerry Introduce Bill To Address Youth Homeless," http://murray.senate.gov/news.cfm?id=291327, January 28, 2008.

work with homeless youth can tell you where the remaining 900 youth are living: they are living on our streets, they are living from couch to couch, or they are living in our shelters.

The law prohibits discharging a child from foster care to homelessness,[2] yet all too often youth exiting foster care end up homeless within the first two years after leaving foster care. Crisis shelters are not and can not be an appropriate safety net for youth aging out of foster care who can not secure and maintain affordable housing on their own. Unfortunately, for many youth this is the only safety net available to them.

ACS needs to work with DHS, HRA, DYCD, NYPD, and private agencies to track outcomes for youth aging out of foster care. This is not a new idea. It was recommended in a report by Citizens' Committee for Children in a January 2000 report titled "Can They Make It On Their Own? Aging Out Of Foster Care – A Report on New York City's Independent Living Program."[3] We see no indication that any progress has been made in the past eight (8) years in tracking and measuring outcomes for youth who have aged out of foster care. This is most clearly evidenced by the inability to identify what happened to 900 youth who did not get Section 8 or NYCHA housing.

The idea of giving priority status for NYCHA housing and Section 8 vouchers to youth aging out of foster care is a good one, but if it does not translate into a real housing opportunity, having a priority status is meaningless. ACS needs to work more closely with NYCHA and DHS to determine why so few youth who applied were actually able to obtain NYCHA housing or a Section 8 voucher, and then identify and take appropriate corrective action wherever possible.

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[2] SSL §409-a(5)(c); 18 N.Y.C.R.R. §430.12(f)(3)(i)(c); Palmer v. Cuomo 121 A.D.2d 194 (1st Dept. 1986).
[3] "Can They Make It On Their Own? Aging Out Of Foster – A Report on New York City's Independent Living Programs," Citizens' Committee for Children. January 2000 at p. 10.

Further, for many youth leaving the foster care system, NYCHA housing, Section 8 vouchers, and ACS housing subsidies will not offer sufficient support to be a viable long term housing solution. Supervised Independent Living Programs and Transitional Independent Living Programs offer alternative housing opportunities with support services that afford youth the opportunity to experience living on their own in a safe and supportive environment. These programs, if well run, can help foster youth to develop independent living skills, and give them the opportunity to grow into responsible adults who are able to manage work, financial obligations and personal responsibilities on their own. ACS, DYCD and DHS, in collaboration with private agencies, can and should work together to improve the utilization of Supervised Independent Living Programs and Transitional Independent Living Programs.

Youth exiting the foster care system, even if able to obtain housing, however, will not be able to maintain housing if they do not have adequate employment. Youth must have good job skills, real work experience, and a decent paying job when they exit the foster care system if they are to have any hope of making it on their own. Most of the foster youth who come to Covenant House have never participated in any employment training program and have little or no work experience. In addition, most do not even have adequate proof of identity. They either do not have a certified copy of their birth certificate or their social security card or both. With very few exceptions, they do not have a New York State, Department of Motor Vehicle issued driver's license or non-driver photo ID, and the current 6 point system of identification to obtain a drivers license or non-driver photo ID makes it virtually impossible for them to get this government issued ID, without which most employers will not hire them.

ACS and the foster care provider agencies must identify those youth for whom independent living is most likely to be their permanency plan, and by no later than age 14

provide the tools, training, experience and networking opportunities that will make them fully employable.

All foster youth who are physically and mentally capable should have part-time employment at age 16. Employment experience is critical for youth who will soon have only themselves to rely on for financial support. ACS, foster care provider agencies, DYCD, and DMV should work together to ensure that each youth has the proper forms of identification (birth certificates, social security card, and DMV photo ID), as well as the necessary employment certificate or permit to make employment possible.

Additionally, foster youth must be given priority for DYCD youth employment programs, including the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), the Young Adult Internship Program, the In-School Youth (ISY) Program, the Out-of-School Youth (OSY), and the NDA Youth Employment Program. These programs offer valuable job readiness and training skills, work experience and networking opportunities for youth. This is particularly important for foster youth who may have fewer opportunities to develop such skills and fewer adult contacts to assist them in obtaining employment.

ACS and DYCD need to work more closely to ensure that foster youth are encouraged and provided with the necessary assistance to take full advantage of these programs. Placement of foster care youth in DYCD employment programs or other appropriate employment programs must be made a priority for Foster care providers and case managers and incentives given to providers to encourage their promotion of these programs with foster youth. Further, there must be adequate measures in place to track utilization of these programs by foster youth and there must be adequate measures in place to track outcomes for foster youth (i.e. how many have obtained employment, how many have maintained employment for 6months, 1 year, etc.). Such

measurements and outcomes must be a part of regular program evaluations and must be communicated between agencies, with successes and deficiencies reported and addressed collaboratively.

What is required by the law is clear, foster youth can not be discharged to homelessness. What is also clear is that the requirements of the law have not been met. What is not yet clear is whether we are ready, willing, and able to work together to ensure that we meet our obligations to this vulnerable population. We at Covenant House would be happy to collaborate further with ACS and DYCD, as well as other city and state agencies, and our colleagues from private agencies who work with foster youth who are aging out of foster care to develop and put into practice a comprehensive strategy to meet our obligations as a community to foster youth.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony on this important topic.

Children Aging out of Care and Becoming Homeless. What's the answer?

Approximately 1000 teens in foster care age out into homelessness each year in NY.

Over the past 10 years my wife (Zola Allen) and I have had the pleasure of providing a home for seven teenagers and young adults from the foster care system (Jessica and her baby, Shanon, Lee, Theodore, Shykeen, Joshua & Jairus). Three of the seven teens that have lived in our home are now young adults in their twenties who are currently living an independent life with occasional financial assistance from the church family that we have helped them to connect with. We currently have four teens in care living in our home and we believe that they won't be fully independent until they are in their mid twenties.

Our son in care Teddy Smith is currently 19 years old and he moved into our home two years ago at the age of 17 years old. He grew up in the foster care system since age five and for most of his life he has not had a stable family. His mother lost her parental rights and he has no connection whatsoever with his father. Unfortunately there wasn't a single family who wanted to give him a permanent home in his 12 years of living in foster care. And out of the 11 different fosters homes he was in most of the time he was "kicked out" for simple problems like catching an attitude or talking back to the foster parent(s).

Teddy just graduated from High School this month (February 2008) and we are very proud of him and how he has been able to progress despite his traumatic experience of growing up in foster care. Teddy has been able to improve his life with the help of God and a loving family like ours who believe we can help him to become a successful black man. We believe that Teddy will not have been able to graduate High School if it were not for us providing a stable family where he felt loved and accepted. If A.C.S would have placed him at 18 years old into the independent living program house with three other teens around his age with no adult supervision he would have failed miserably and probably would have easily went back into a world of crime (dealing drugs etc.).

Teddy will be 20 years old this August and plans to enter Nyack College this fall. He will most like be graduating from college at about 24 or 25 years old. At that point it will probably take a few months for him to find a secure job where he can support himself independently. And he will most likely still need financial support from our family until he is able to become completely financially independent.

As a family we are here to support Teddy even when he ages out of the foster care system, because we know that in the real world that is what it's going to take for him to get on his own two feet. And especially in America's economy where there are less jobs because jobs are being sent overseas, inmates and immigrants are willing to work below minimum wage and companies are downsizing every day due to the use of computers and technology. And on top of all of that most of the children aging out are black and latino, so unfortunately that's another strike against them. As we look at the bigger picture and the harsh reality facing foster children who age out into homelessness, we will realize that the answer to preventing homelessness is the need for these children to be placed in permanent families.

Written by Keith Craig Allen
(718) 424-7243 - office, craig@beatsnblessings.com

Testimony of

Stephanie Gendell
Associate Executive Director for Policy and Public Affairs
Citizens' Committee for Children

Before the
New York City Council
General Welfare Committee and
Youth Services Committee

February 26, 2008

Good afternoon. I am Stephanie Gendell, the Associate Executive Director for Policy and Public Affairs at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc. (CCC). CCC is a 64- year old independent child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that every child in New York is healthy, housed, educated and safe.

I would like to thank Council members de Blasio and Fidler and the members of the General Welfare and Youth Services Committees for holding today's oversight hearing hearing to examine ACS and DYCD's efforts to prevent youth aging out of foster care from becoming homeless.

Unfortunately, both nationally and in New York, outcomes for youth who age out of foster care are generally bleak and too often include homelessness, reliance on public assistance, school failure, and jail sentences. These young people need to fend for themselves to secure housing, employment, health care and an education, often without the support of a family and with the added stressors associated with having been abused, neglected and in the foster care system. Our country, our state and this City must do better by these youngsters—the children and youth for whom the state and localities stepped in to protect from their own parents.

1) Preventive Services

The best way to prevent young people from aging out of the foster care system and then becoming homeless is to prevent children and youth from ever coming into foster care in the first place. More families should be strengthened and supported by community-based preventive services that reduce the number of children inflicted with the trauma and disruption caused by removal and foster care. In addition, preventive service programs need the resources and tools to meet the needs of youth.

The City must maintain its commitment to preventive services through continuing to expand the numbers of families being served, lowering caseloads, and expanding the quality and quantity of services available to teenagers.

2) Foster Care Services

For those children who cannot remain safely in their homes and for whom foster care is the appropriate measure, the best way to prevent young people from aging out of foster care to homelessness is to strengthen the foster care system's ability to expedite permanency and ensure well-being for children, youth and their families.

If New York's child welfare system were perfect, no child would age out of the system because every child would either be able to return home to his/her family and when this was not possible, be adopted by another caring and loving family. We must hold ACS and its agencies accountable for getting as close to this ideal as possible.

Foster children and their families need high quality, effective services in place as quickly as possible so that the children can return home or be adopted expeditiously, rather than spending many years in care and then aging out of the system. In addition, while children

and youth are in foster care, their multitude of needs, ranging from mental health to education to employment assistance to family planning, must be met.

3) Homeless Prevention

Unfortunately for the youth who do age out of foster care without a stable and supportive family to live with, the shortage of affordable and supportive housing in New York City, and the limited income an 18-21 year old can earn under the best of circumstances, securing and maintaining housing is extremely difficult.

In 2005, CCC surveyed homeless youth and in 2006 published its results in *Young and Homeless: A Look at Homeless Youth in New York City.* CCC surveyed 88 homeless youth and found that 30% of the young people reported having foster care history. Of these young people, 77% reported being in foster care for two or more years.

While ACS and other city and state agencies have taken steps to collaborate and engage in ventures to support these youth and prevent homelessness, there is still a long way to go. The up to $300 per month housing subsidy is insufficient to sufficiently stabilize a person's ability to pay the rent. In addition, housing subsidy ends when a young person turns 21.

NYCHA public housing units are starting to become more available for foster youth, but the quantity is still limited. In addition, foster youth who have criminal histories, who are not legal citizens or who have babies, are not eligible for these units. New York/New York III is a wonderful demonstration project of what can be done when the state and city work together, but still only have a limited number of units. Similarly, several non-profits have taken huge risks to try to meet the needs of this population and while Good Shepherd's Chelsea Foyer, Independence Inn, the Door and Lantern to name a few, are doing a wonderful job, they cannot meet the demand.

4) **CCC Recommendations:**

Unfortunately the issue of affordable housing in New York City is a significant problem for all New Yorkers, regardless of whether they have aged out of foster care-- and the solutions will be beyond the scope of ACS and DYCD. That said, CCC has the following recommendations for New York State and New York City to target the housing and homelessness issues facing youth aging out of foster care.

It would be virtually impossible for any 21 year old in New York City to be able to continue his/her education, while at the same time securing enough income to pay for food, clothing and rent. For foster youth these challenges are often compounded by the instability of their family situation, their lack of connection to a community, and their unmet mental health needs. These recommendations are made in recognition of the special circumstances foster youth face.

- Plan ahead: Foster care agency staff, law guardians, judges, ACS and youth themselves know when a young person will be turning 21. Plans for where the young person will reside must be addressed at permanency hearings and family team conferences well before a young person's 21st birthday.

- Increase and expand the housing subsidy for youth: A housing subsidy of $300 per month is not enough to stabilize a young person's housing situation in New York City. At a minimum, CCC recommends that the housing subsidy be increased to $500 per month; however, ideally the housing subsidy would adjust for inflation over time. In addition, the housing subsidy needs to extend beyond age 21—preferably until the age of 25.

- Provide free tuition and room and board at SUNY and CUNY: New York State, in coordination with New York City, should develop a program where all current and former foster children can attend state and city colleges free of charge. Nothing could help former foster children more than furthering their education; yet the need to pay for housing often leads youth aging out to feel they need to pursue employment instead of furthering their education. Removing barriers to post-secondary education for children in the custody of the state and city is an investment that can improve their lives forever.

- Aftercare Services: Research has demonstrated that the brain is not fully developed until the age of 25. Even so, our foster care system expects aging out youth to be self-sufficient by the age of 21, even though they have fewer support systems than the average teen. These young people need to navigate the education, health care, housing, mental health and employment systems, and too often the homeless, public assistance and detention systems. On the other hand, an effective aftercare system that ensured supports to every young person aging out of foster care, could provide much needed support to young people at a fraction of the cost. In the long-run, this would be a cost-effective means of supporting these young people and preventing homelessness.

- Coordinated City Housing Strategies: The affordable and supportive housing shortage in New York City is a severe problem beyond the scope of merely ACS and DYCD. CCC asks the State and the City to create a plan to address the affordable housing crisis for disconnected youth. In addition, New York City needs a task force comprised of the Mayor's Office, ACS, DYCD, DHS, NYCHA and HPD to enhance the coordination and collaboration among these agencies, and to develop short and long term solutions.

Testimony: New York City Council Committees on General Welfare And Youth Services
Oversight: Examining DYCD's and ACS's Efforts to Prevent Youth Aging out of Foster Care from Becoming Homeless
February 26, 2008

Presented by: Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement, Inc. (HCCI)

Many of today's college graduates are unable to support themselves financially, in spite of having a college education. As a result, many of these college graduates move back home with their parents for financial and emotional support. For many youth aging out of foster care in New York City, they do not have their parents to provide them with the same support. According to the Administration for Children's Services, 80% of youth who age out of foster care, must rely on themselves. However, only 20% were adopted or returned to their birth families. The agency also stated that more than one-third of youth, who leave foster care by age 19, were not working or in school. ACS found that nearly 45% of youth who exited care did not report any income in any one quarter for three years and about 33% report earnings at or below the federal poverty level. In regards to emotional health, foster care youth are twice as likely to become parents by age19, than the general population of 19 year olds. The agency also stated that nearly 22% of New York City's homeless population has had some experience in the foster care system; this results in youth who age out of foster care being the most likely to end up homeless.

In regard to the aforementioned statistics, we can no longer ignore the fact that young adults need our help. We can not blame the young adults for their parents' inability to provide for them when they were children. It is not their fault that the people who gave them life did not provide a stable *quality* of life for them. When we do not provide affordable housing, appropriate information for family planning and birth control, and job training programs after they leave the system, we blame the young adults for being in foster care. We must make a collective effort as a community to prevent former foster care youth from being ill prepared for life's challenges.

As a community, we can prevent homelessness and promote self-sufficiency in our young adults, by providing supportive housing. According to Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH), investing in young adults *now* can reduce their long-term dependence on social service systems, while increasing their chances of good health, well-being and continuous self-sufficiency. HCCI has answered the call by creating 26 studio apartments in the David & Joyce Dinkins Gardens for youth aging out of foster care. While the young adults reside in affordable housing, they receive on-site supportive services in life skills, including financial literacy, home management, job placement and career exploration. This program targets foster care youth, who currently live in Central Harlem, or Community Board 10. There should be more of these programs to welcome and assist our foster care youth.

In addition to supportive housing, many young adults need to obtain marketable job skills leading to stable employment and income. HCCI started a Construction Trades Academy to provide adults with basic carpentry skills to gain employment in the city's construction industry. Since the median income of CD 10 is $19,920 and 37% of residents live below the poverty level, many construction jobs can provide incomes that double this income. Since more than one-third of former foster care youth report earnings at or below the federal poverty level, this program provides experience and skills that can prevent them from depending on public assistance.

These two programs are just a start for young adults; they are not enough. Other organizations like HCCI, need government support to continue and create more programs for young adults aging out of foster care. These young adults need affordable housing, to prevent them from becoming homeless. The government needs to create access to health care and health insurance for young adults, so they can utilize all of the medical services to strengthen their personal well-being. The government should also put more funding into employment training and placement programs, which would enable the young adults to provide for themselves and not rely on public assistance for financial support. By providing funding for these programs and services, we are not abandoning the young adult that is a product of foster care, but creating solutions to help them to become productive citizens.

Respectfully submitted by:
Eva Gordon, Director
Young Adult Supportive Services for David & Joyce Dinkins Gardens.

New York City Council

Hearing General Welfare Committee

On

Housing and Youth Aging Out

Tuesday, February 26, 2008

Good afternoon, my name is Sean Gladden and I have been in care all my life. When I turned 18 years of age I went to college and the Administration of Children Services (ACS) supported me in that choice. I appreciated the support, because they helped me in pursuing higher education. At the time, I did not know what I wanted to do exactly. I knew I wanted to live on my own however I did not know how to go about doing that. I spoke to my law guardian and she gave me information about obtaining housing through ACS. After being told that information, I went to my agency and asked about it. They replied that they would complete the necessary housing paperwork. When I was 19 years old, I did not have a place to live, due to the fact that they had sent me to live with my sister as a kinship arrangement, but that fell through. Yet, I remained enrolled in college and then I joined the Army National Guard in order to remedy my housing situation. During this time, my agency still had not completed my housing paperwork.

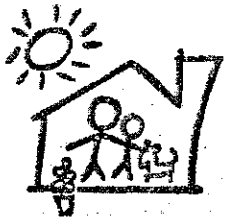
I transferred to another college and during this time I was obtaining my Associates degree in Criminal Justice. Still my paper work was not processed by my agency. While I was at this college I kept in contact with my social worker and my social worker said that they were doing my paper work. I was 20 years old and soon to turn 21 and about to age out of care, but I didn't have a place to live.

After I turned 21, my worker called me in to fill out a housing application and I filled out the applications for NYCHA and Section 8. I then took the applications down to ACS. While I waited for a response a week later my case worker called me and said that ACS had denied my application, and that I needed an Exception to Policy. It took a year to obtain the Exception to Policy. Almost immediately upon receiving the Exception to

Policy, ACS told me that mine was about to expire and that I needed another one in order to apply for housing. I was beginning to lose hope, but then I was directed to a place by an ACS employee called In the Spirit of the Children. They have helped me, and are continuing to help me, go to the right places to and get correct information during this process. Recently, ACS gave me another Exception to Policy and hopefully, I will be able to age out into my own apartment. These things should have been done before I turned 21. I am currently 22 years old and I realized that I am blessed to still have the opportunity to receive housing through ASC.

I would like to thank the NYC Council for hearing my testimony and I hope that this sheds some light on the issue of housing for those aging out of foster care.

NYC City Council
Youth Services Committee & Committee on General Welfare
Oversight Hearing: Examining ACS' and DYCD's Efforts to Prevent Youth Aging Put of Foster Care from Becoming Homeless
February 26, 2008



Green Chimneys Children's Services: NYC Division
Foster Care and RHY Programs for LGBTQ Youth
Division Director, Theresa Nolan
tnolan@greenchimneys.org

Agency/Division Background:
The NYC Division of Green Chimneys operates both foster care and homeless youth residential programs for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth, with a total of 66 beds. 46 of these beds are foster care programming (Gramercy Residence, AOBH, SILP) and 20 of them are runaway/homeless youth (RHY) beds (of which 10 are funded through DYCD). Operating from a positive youth development philosophy, the programs focus on preparing youth for healthy, self-sufficient adulthood, or in some cases to return to family homes. One of our foster care programs is for "Hard to Place" youth, which means that they have been through multiple placements and/or have mental health issues and/or have significant substance abuse issues and/or have juvenile justice involvement and/or are otherwise "difficult" for the foster care system to place in a permanent setting.

Many of the youth are preparing to "age out" of foster care so their goals in our programs include learning life skills to prepare them for self-sufficiency. The age at which youth are no longer eligible for foster care services in NYC is 21, the same age cutoff for RHY programs through DYCD.

Description of Problem:
As a provider for both foster care and homeless youth, it is very easy to see the difficulties that face providers for both populations. I see youth in our RHY program that have foster care history and I see youth age out of foster care with little permanency in place. The most difficult situation facing youth aging out of foster care with no definite place to live is that at 21 they are too old for most homeless youth programs so they become a homeless adult and face the hurdles of the adult system. For many homeless young adults, the adult system only serves to perpetuate the homeless situation, which leads to a higher probability of long-term chronic homelessness. Another parallel issue for youth aging out of care is the institutionalization some of them experience from being raised in a "system." Youth in care have a myriad of protections in place that they come to rely on, and even to expect. However, when they turn 21 and are out of care, they have little to fall back on.

Older youth in foster care typically come from precarious home situations and are very unlikely to be returned to family or adopted. What usually brings an older youth into one of our foster care placements is usually a complicated combination of a long history of care, juvenile justice involvement due to family problems, substance abuse, and/or mental illness and/or recent

uncovering of abuse/neglect. Any of these indicators translate into a young person with a lot to deal with and a lot to work on. These are exactly the young people that have the hardest time preparing for adulthood and readying themselves to have a stable place to live by their 21st birthday. Historically LGBTQ youth in foster care experience multiple placements because of mistreatment, harassment, and discrimination in some placements, foster homes, and family homes; this can cause them disruption in school as well as emotional adjustment issues.

An estimated 28% of youth who have participated in our RHY transitional program have had some length of foster care history. Not all have come directly from foster care; some were adopted and then had problems with adoptive families, some signed themselves out and then were unable to care for themselves, some returned to family and continued to have issues with their families. We have found that youth without foster care history have a slightly higher rate of completion of our 18-month program versus residents we've had with foster care history. We have also seen that youth with foster care history are much less likely to move in with family after leaving our program as compared with youth with no foster care history. Anecdotally, this may indicate that foster care youth become accustomed to "the system" and have a difficult time in an RHY program in which their stay is conditional based on performance and/or participation in the program.

Recommendations:

- Create specific foster care programming for youth with multiple service needs.
- Extend stay in foster care for particular youth (i.e. those with multiple issues and/or those who were delayed in preparing for aging out due to substance abuse treatment, mental health hospitalization, etc.) past the age of 21.
- Create a linkage between ACS and permanent housing resources to guarantee housing/programming for youth with multiple needs and who are inappropriate for independent living when they age out of care.
- Extend age limit of DYCD services so that youth who age out of ACS at 21 have a fallback that is youth appropriate rather than the adult shelter system (e.g. allow drop-in centers to do case management for youth who leave foster care in order to have a support network in place as they transition to non-system living).

New York City Council
General Welfare Committee
Bill de Blasio, Committee Chair

February 26, 2008
1:00PM

Testimony
Of
Myrna Forney, Director Special Projects
The Door

The Door is a community-based organization established in 1972 to serve the needs of young people between the ages of 12 and 21. Our mission is to empower young people to reach their potential by providing comprehensive youth development services in a diverse and caring environment. In 2007, The Door served almost 10,000 young people; we conservatively estimate that approximately 20% of those youth are in foster care. The youth who frequent The Door reside in all five boroughs, as well as Westchester County, Rockland County, New Jersey and Connecticut. They come from diverse backgrounds both socially and economically with the majority of our young people residing in single parent homes. They come to The Door seeking services in the areas of education, career services/work readiness, mental health counseling, food and nutrition, recreation and arts programming, legal services and primary health care.

While each Door member has the ability to access any and all services offered at The Door, we have programs and supports designed specifically to address the issues of youth in care. Young people in foster care, who come to The Door, can access programs designed to address some of the barriers to success which are frequently connected to youth as they transition to adulthood. Two of The Door's programs, The Academy and Passport 2 Success, represent just this type of program. Additionally, The Door's Legal Services Center has programs targeted for foster youth. The programs are supported by the comprehensive nature of the remaining services available at The Door. Youth are able to obtain mental health counseling, medical assistance, educational services and many other programs.

The Academy, a collaboration with F·E·G·S, is a pilot project privately funded by The Heckscher Foundation for Children to provide educational and career/job readiness services along with the necessary wrap around support services to enable a young person to transition into adulthood successfully. The participants in The Academy are referred by five contract agencies; Children's Village, Good Shepherd, SCO, Safe Space and JCCA. In The Academy, each young person in connected to an Advisor who serves as the point of contact with staff from the various agencies to supervise the provision of services. Passport 2 Success, a partnership with ACS, provides work readiness and life skills training for young people in both individual and group training workshops. In Passport 2 Success, young people are assigned life coaches who work with them to explore career options and prepare them for the work force. The Legal Services Center represents current and former foster youth in connection with issues in the area of immigration, entitlements, rights in care, and an array of other issues they face as young adults.

While ACS continues to take steps forward with its Improved Outcomes for Children initiative and its Preparing Youth for Adulthood initiative, there are several issues which must be addressed to ensure a successful transition for youth. Some of the larger issues which should be discussed are the prevention of young people's discharge to homelessness, availability of housing, and the retention and tracking of young people in secure housing after discharge.

There is a great need for the coordination of governmental efforts to prevent our young people in foster care from being discharged to homelessness. First, ACS and the foster care agencies must be held accountable for ensuring that young people in care are prepared to negotiate the world outside of foster care. This must be done by providing youth in care the tools necessary to make the decisions required of adults living independently. Second, all available and presently existing resources must be coordinated to ensure ease of access for young people prior to discharge. Efforts must be made to guarantee that trial discharges and final discharges are done in a planned and timely fashion to allow for proper evaluation of sustainability. Finally, ACS, foster care agencies and other governmental agencies should be held accountable for the discharge results of young people who are improperly discharged. A system must be put in place to track and ensure the proper discharge to and retention of stable housing by young people in care.

Agency Accountability

Advocates estimate that anywhere from 1,100[1] to 1,400[2] youth are discharged from foster care to independent living each year in New York City. The tragedy in this is that many youth who grow up in care, whether in a group home or in a foster boarding home, often do so without developing the skill set necessary to live independently as adults. In order to maintain control, Agencies and ACS workers make most major decisions for a young person and restricting the young person's limited rights when Agency rules are broken. Young people in care become institutionalized and grow up having everything done for them until the age of 18, when they are instructed to go out and do everything for themselves.

We must begin the process of de-institutionalizing youth in care earlier. Training and modeling so that young people develop the ability to advocate for themselves and to make proper choices must begin upon a young person's entry into care and continue until his/her departure. A young person must be provided with the opportunity to make their own decisions sooner. There needs to be a shift in the culture of the system to become more youth development oriented.

There needs to be a coordinated effort between ACS, the Department of Education and the contract agencies to more closely monitor the educational advancement of youth in care. After a number of school interruptions and without a person/agency taking responsibility to ensure that the young people obtain a proper education, youth become disconnected from school. In the end, the system is faced with young people, who are disenchanted with school; have not developed the skills necessary for success; and, without enough credits to continue. These young people frequently find their way to The Door beginning as early as 14 and 15 years of age seeking GED assistance and unwilling to consider re-entry into the regular classroom setting. These children often report that

[1] THE CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY, "Aging Out of Foster Care," *available at* http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/press/think/wwt_article/1820257?pg=all

[2] Door Legal Services estimate

they have not attended school while in care and that the supports needed for their success where not available to them. Due in large part to the unstable conditions of lengthy foster care placement, youth in foster care are systematically disadvantaged—economically, educationally and emotionally.

Coordination of Resources

Foster youth preparing to age out or who have "signed themselves out" are eligible for a variety of independent housing options. These include access to public housing from the New York City Housing Authority, the ACS Housing Subsidy and possibly Section 8, as well as a handful of transitional living and supportive housing programs for young people. Unfortunately, few foster youth learn about these options in time to have permanent housing at the time they age out of care. The Door's Legal Services Center (the "Center") attorneys routinely coach foster youth through accessing housing benefits. The Center attorneys represents the foster youth in fair hearings if they are denied public housing.

The Center has developed effective strategies to prevent ACS from illegally discharging foster youth to homelessness, a practice that has become all too common. Through administrative challenges and threats of litigation, young people turning 21 have been able to remain in foster care until permanent housing becomes available for them. For youth who have signed themselves out of foster care before turning 21 and then become homeless, Center attorneys routinely advocate for them to be placed in appropriate foster homes or to secure ACS-related permanent housing options if they are prepared to live independently.

Often a young person's discharge to homelessness could be prevented simply by aligning the rules and regulations which exist with the realities of youth leaving care. Young people in care, as with the general population, frequently do not have the ability to get and maintain a job which will provide them a living wage at 18. Although they are required to have a source of income in order to obtain housing, they can not access public assistance until they are discharged from foster care. When faced with the rules which restrict their ability to obtain the supports necessary to survive, youth often opt to enter the shelter system in hopes of obtaining a faster track to shelter.

A greater effort must be made to coordinate services between ACS and governmental agencies. A reduction in the number of youth discharged to homelessness could be affected by the simple coordination of services between agencies. A simple alignment of the various rules and regulations to recognize and eliminate the barriers created for youth transitioning from care would prevent fact patterns such as the ones that follow.

- One young man sought The Door's help after aging-out of foster care and ending up homeless despite being enrolled in college and having applied for NYCHA Public Housing and Section 8 through ACS two years before his 21st birthday. His NYCHA applications were never fully processed, and despite the support of his agency, ACS did not grant him an exception to policy to remain in foster care for the purposes of housing or college support. Furthermore, he received no

notice that his application had dropped through the cracks until months after he had aged-out of foster care and was no longer eligible for NYCHA priority housing through ACS. This error has never been explained or remedied, and the young man continues to struggle with finding and maintaining stable housing.

- In a closed Door case, a 20-year-old young woman with an infant son did not know the process for properly applying for NYCHA housing in preparation for aging-out until a Door attorney took her case. Her agency only assisted her with filing the application after numerous orders from her family court judge, and therefore, her 21st birthday arrived without NYCHA having received her application from ACS. Only after her Door attorney filed an Order to Show Cause did ACS agree to extend this young woman an exception to policy to allow her to stay in foster care and retain her NYCHA zero priority eligibility – an exception that had to be renewed twice before her NYCHA application was fully processed. Her case was further complicated when her agency discovered that the exceptions to policy were running out every three months instead of six. She faced constant fear, and warnings from caseworkers that she would end up in a homeless shelter with her son – which is precisely what happened after 6 months. Shortly after being placed in a shelter for mothers and children, she and her son contracted scabies from the beds, and her son was hospitalized for almost a week. Fortunately, her NYCHA interview was still granted and she was placed in an apartment within two months; three months later, after waiting for the processing of more paperwork, she obtained furniture through her ACS housing subsidy.

There must be better coordination between ACS, NYCHA, OMH and OMRDD. This can be achieved in several ways. There must be streamlining of the requirements for qualification to apply for services and assistance, recognizing the circumstances and challenges for foster youth.

Discharge

ACS and the Agencies should make greater effort to provide young people with a trial discharge when they reach 20.5 years of age. Discharge grants and other entitlements must be in place prior to the moment of discharge. The existing rules and regulations governing access to public benefits should be revised to address the circumstance and timing of young people exiting foster care and entering the adult world. Specifically, young people should be allowed apply for these benefits prior to discharge in order to ensure that there is no gap in service after discharge from foster care. Additionally, when it is determined that a discharge placement is unstable prior to a young person reaching the age of 21, a system should be put in place to allow the young person to return to care. Supports are needed to for young people who find themselves without stable housing after they reach 21.

Conclusion

In the absence of agency accountability and coordination of existing services, many young people exiting foster care will continue to do so without access to stable housing. They are faced with the prospect of being ill-prepared for the life they face. Unable to

earn a living wage, under-educated and denied the resources that were put in place, partially, to assist them in their transition to adulthood. We must underscore that inn the absence of greater efforts on the part of NYC and its agencies, the young people are almost guaranteed to have a rough road in the future. They face an increased likelihood of being in abusive, violent or otherwise unsuitable living situations; involved with the criminal justice system; and having a limited education.

TESTIMONY

The Council of the City of New York
Committee on General Welfare
Bill de Blasio, Chair
Committee on Youth Services
Lewis A. Fidler, Chair

"Examining DYCD's and ACS' Efforts to Prevent Youth Aging out of Foster Care from Becoming Homeless"

February 26, 2008
New York, New York

Presented by
Nancy Rosenbloom
Heather O'Hayre

The Legal Aid Society
Juvenile Rights Practice
Tamara A. Steckler
Attorney-in-Charge
199 Water Street, 3rd floor
New York, NY 10038

Good afternoon. I am Nancy Rosenbloom, Director of the Special Litigation and Law Reform Unit of the Legal Aid Society's Juvenile Rights Practice. With me is Heather O'Hayre, Social Worker with our Adolescent Practice Team in Manhattan. We submit this testimony on behalf of the Legal Aid Society, and thank the Committees on General Welfare and Youth Services for inviting us to share our thoughts on how our City treats older children in foster care as they prepare to live on their own, and in particular on what can be done to prevent so many young people from becoming homeless after being in foster care. We applaud the Council for tackling this important subject, and look forward to the valuable contributions that we are sure the Committees will make in this area of vital concern to our City's children and their families.

The Legal Aid Society is the nation's largest and oldest provider of legal services to poor families and individuals. Legal Aid's Juvenile Rights Practice provides comprehensive legal representation to children who appear before the New York City Family Court in abuse, neglect, juvenile delinquency, and other proceedings affecting children's rights and welfare. Last year, our staff represented some 29,000 children, almost 90% in the context of child protective proceedings. Approximately 40% of our clients are aged 12 and over. Our perspective comes from our daily contacts with children and their families, and also from our frequent interactions with the courts, social service providers, and State and City agencies. In addition to representing many thousands of individual children each year in trial and appellate courts, we also pursue impact litigation and other law reform initiatives on behalf of our clients.

Who Are the Young People "Aging Out" of Care?

The foster care population nationwide and in New York City has shifted dramatically in recent years. Currently, half the young people in foster care with ACS and its contract agencies

are aged 12 and older[1]. According to ACS' published data, between 60 and 100 young people each month are discharged to independent living, meaning they are never adopted and never discharged from care to live with their families[2]. Instead, they may remain in care until age 21, when they "age out" and are no longer entitled to ACS' services or the protection of the Family Court. Young people leaving foster care to live independently face much greater challenges than non-foster-children; the latter most often reach adulthood with the assistance and support of family and community. All too often, in addition to the trauma of being removed from family members and placed in foster care, young people preparing to leave care have also been moved from setting to setting and community to community while in care, making it difficult to maintain lasting ties with supportive adults. They need the basic things that children who live in stable families need when they grow up, but face more obstacles to meeting those needs.

In our experience, because ACS and the other responsible agencies in our City have not fulfilled their obligations in many instances, it is far from certain that young people aging out of foster care will do so with a place to live, a job and/or ongoing education, income security, and health insurance. Today we focus on the problem of homelessness, which is experienced by young people aging out of foster care without a family to return to, but which also befalls far too many young people who have left foster care with a variety of plans for permanency. Legal Aid's Homeless Rights Project provides legal assistance to homeless families and individuals. In that project, we represent many people – now adults – who were in foster care as children. We see firsthand what was documented in a recent study by the Tier II Coalition – a group of 38 not-for-profit family shelter providers who work under contract with New York City. *There is something very wrong with how our City treats its young people when 13.9% of families in*

[1] ACS' last published figure is 49.5%. http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/downloads/pdf/outcomes/out6_citywide.pdf.

[2] ACS website, http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/downloads/pdf/stats_monthly_update.pdf

family shelters are headed by parents who had been in foster care, and 2.4% of those parents "entered the shelter system directly from foster care" to DHS shelters[3].

ACS is Legally Obligated to Prepare Children for Independent Living and Ensure that They Leave Care with Safe and Stable Permanent Housing

The law is clear that ACS cannot discharge a child from foster care to homelessness,[4] yet because the permanent housing options for these young people are so limited and so poorly utilized, New York City's Department of Homeless Services sees many former foster children applying for shelter[5].

New York's Social Services Law, Family Court Act, and State regulations absolutely require that young people whose goal is independent living be provided with assistance with permanent housing, employment, education, health care, and public assistance if needed[6]. These rights are to be ensured by ACS and the foster care agencies with which ACS contracts. *The law plainly prohibits ACS and foster care agencies from discharging young people from foster care to homeless shelters for adults or families, or to single-room occupancy hotels.* State regulation includes this bar and also directs that *"No child may be discharged to another planned living arrangement with a permanency resource, unless . . . there is a reasonable expectation that the residence will remain available to the child for at least the first 12 months after discharge.*[7]*"* In other words, it is illegal to discharge a young person to a single men's or women's shelter, to a homeless youth shelter, or to the Department of Homeless Services' emergency housing intake

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[3] "Characteristics of Homeless Families in the New York City Tier II Shelter System," A Study by the Tier II Coalition Research and Evaluation Committee at p. 6 (based on data collected in Spring 2000).
[4] 18 N.Y.C.R.R. § 430.12(f)(3)(i)(c); Palmer v. Cuomo, 121 A.D.2d 194 (1st Dep't 1986); SSL 409-a(5)(c).
[5] The numbers in New York City are echoed nationally: Twenty to 36% of homeless people have been in foster care as compared to only 2% of the overall population. National Resource Center for Youth Development, *Improving Outcomes for Older Youth: What Judges and Attorneys Need to Know* (2004). www.nrcys.ou.edu/nrcyd/publications/pdfs/improveoutcomes.pdf

[6] *See, e.g.,* SSL §§ 366, 398, 409-a; Educ. Law §3203; Family Court Act §§ 255, 1055; 18 N.Y.C.R.R. §§ 427.3, 430, 441.
[7] 18 N.Y.C.R.R. 430.12(f)(3)(i)(c).

office (the PATH office). While we no longer see as we once did discharge plans that say "discharge to Emergency Assistance Unit," such discharges continue to occur, yet the paperwork now reflects them in the vague category of "discharge to another planned living arrangement with a permanency resource," (the new name for "independent living").

Youth in Foster Care are Unable to Access the Few Available Permanent Housing Options

Although Commissioner Mattingly and his high-level staff have the best of intentions and plans for reforming ACS in the long term, on the ground level each day, we find that the agency is failing in its duty to the older children in its care.

There are few permanent housing options available for adolescents leaving foster care to live independently. Not all are realistic options, and young people are often not told about them in time to actually find apartments. For example, as required by the Social Services Law, ACS operates a housing subsidy program that is available to 18-year-olds leaving foster care who will have sufficient income with the small subsidy of up to $300 per month to afford an apartment on the open market. Given the extremely low vacancy rate in low-income housing in NYC, this subsidy is insufficient to meet housing needs, and so it is nearly impossible for our clients to take advantage of this opportunity. The $300 amount was set by State law in the 1980's and has not increased. The State should increase the monthly amount, but the City could also fund its own monthly subsidy, as it has done for selected other populations, to make this a realistic option for young adults leaving foster care. We urge the City to do so. Even when young people are able to use the ACS subsidy, however, it has taken ACS' fiscal unit between 8 and 12 weeks to issue our clients the checks required to secure their apartments, and another 8 to 12 weeks to issue furniture grants once our clients present them with a secured lease. This delay has caused young

people to lose apartments because landlords cannot wait, and results in new tenants moving into housing without beds, tables or chairs for the 2-3 months they must wait for furniture allowances. ACS has recently promised to shorten this time frame by having agencies issue checks and be reimbursed, but our clients have yet to see this new procedure work.

Another option is the local priority for aging-out youth for New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing and Section 8 leased housing vouchers (also administered by NYCHA). ACS and NYCHA have made the process for accessing these options so onerous, however, that many young people who could benefit have been deprived of the chance. ACS must first give formal permission for a young person to apply for this housing, and then ACS forwards the application to NYCHA. Yet ACS has neither required foster care agencies to ensure that these applications are completed by a certain date, nor has the agency set a protocol governing how the applications get to ACS. These applications must be filled out on or shortly after our clients' 18th birthdays to ensure that they are complete and that there is time to process them once the young people are prepared to be trial discharged to their own apartment (or on the 20th birthday, whichever comes first). Moreover, contract foster care agency workers are required to complete a section of the application before ACS processes it. With high turnover in workers at all of the agencies, our clients' applications are frequently not completed and are often lost. Many clients have had to fill out applications two to three times before they are sent to NYCHA for consideration. ACS and NYCHA have not successfully coordinated their efforts either, causing delays and improper denials of permanent housing to this vulnerable population.

There are a number of ways in which ACS and agencies' practices themselves present obstacles for young people seeking to access permanent housing, and these practices must change immediately. For example, ACS approves discharges of young people from foster care

to college dormitories. By definition, dorms are not permanent housing, and young people will have nowhere to live after college, between semesters, and during summer. Additionally, ACS will not refer to NYCHA youth whose foster parents say they can live in the household after their 21st birthday, even if this is a very temporary situation designed to keep the youth from becoming homeless. For NYCHA-administered public housing and Section 8 rental assistance, proof of income is required. When young people are going to need public assistance after leaving foster care (but must apply for housing *before* they exit foster care), ACS must coordinate with HRA to arrange for presumptive eligibility documentation, so that income can be proved in time for applications to be processed. One of the most egregious failures is ACS' not coordinating with the State Office of Mental Health (OMH) and the State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) so that young people with disabilities who need supportive housing can access it. Time and again, we have seen agencies who should be working together to help young people instead seek to dump "difficult cases" on each other.

Teens are Improperly Denied Foster Care Placements and Sent to Temporary Shelter

Adolescents in foster care are placed in inappropriate settings far more often than younger children. ACS has made great efforts to reduce the number of group homes and this was a step in the right direction. At the same time, however, there are far too few successful alternatives. Tragically, when teenagers in care do not succeed in one foster care setting, ACS sometimes fails to find an appropriate placement and instead refers them to temporary shelter. We have also seen ACS and contract agencies discharging young people deemed "uncooperative," from foster care to homeless shelters. When teens are unlawfully pushed out of foster care in this way, they lose the entitlement to services and supports that come with being in foster care, and they also lose the benefit of court oversight of their placements.

•Recently, a Legal Aid client who was moved out of his group home was sent to ACS' Children's Center for a new foster care placement. ACS did not find him a lawful placement but instead sent him twice to the Covenant House shelter, which is not a foster care placement. His Legal Aid attorney had to file an emergency motion in Family Court to force ACS and the foster care agency to get her client a foster care placement in a Supervised Independent Living apartment.

•At another group foster care residence, specifically designated a "therapeutic residence," several of our teenaged clients have been sent to Covenant House's shelter for "respite." Others have been threatened with being sent to Covenant House as punishment for poor behavior.

Needless to say, it is the duty of a foster care agency to provide any needed counseling or therapy to young people in its care; it is not permissible to push them out of foster care into a temporary shelter. Yet Covenant House stated publicly at a forum last month that 38% of the young people in their shelter came from foster care.

Conclusion

There is a shortage of foster homes for adolescents, and although ACS has been trying to focus on recruitment for this population, for many of our clients the efforts are too little too late. We continue to hear caseworkers say things like, "no one is going to take him because he is a teenager." Many agencies still do not adequately address the differences between raising young children and raising adolescents; there must be ongoing, very specific adolescent training for foster parents and agency staff, with more intensive support to assist foster parents through the trials of adolescence and young adulthood.

Once in foster care, for those who will not be discharged to a family, the City must work intensively to access all available housing options. Young people should never be formally discharged or informally pushed out of foster care to homelessness – whether that takes the shape of a discharge to a location that is unstable, or an outright (and illegal) referral to

emergency shelter. Children who experience foster care already suffer trauma. Our City should never add to that trauma by failing to ensure that those children have safe and stable permanent housing when they leave foster care.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. We will be happy to answer any questions the chairs and committee members have.

Contact: Nancy Rosenbloom
nrosenbloom@legal-aid.org, 212-577-3265

Testimony of Lawyers For Children

Submitted by:
Karen J. Freedman
Executive Director
Lawyers For Children, Inc.
New York, New York

Presented to:

Bill de Blasio,
Chairperson,
New York City Council Committee on General Welfare
And
Lewis A. Fidler
Chair, Committee on Youth Services

Public Hearing: "Oversight – Examining ACS' and DYCD's Efforts to Prevent Youth Aging Out of Foster Care from Becoming Homeless"

February 26, 2008

Thank you, Chairperson de Blasio, Charperson Fidler and the members of the General Welfare and Youth Services Committees, for providing Lawyers For Children the opportunity to testify, and for your continued interest in the welfare of our City's most vulnerable children. Lawyers For Children is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to protecting the rights of individual children in foster care and to compelling system-wide foster care reform in the City of New York. Every child we represent receives free legal and social work services in cases involving foster care, abuse, neglect, termination of parental rights, adoption, guardianship, custody and visitation. Our caseload exceeds 6000 such cases each year. Through a generous grant from the Robin Hood Foundation, we have established the Adolescents Confronting Transition project ("ACT Project"),

through which an attorney and two masters level social workers work full time to represent young people in foster care between the ages of 18 and 21. In addition, two youth advocates --both former foster youth – are now part of our ACT project team and will be providing additional support to clients as they attempt to navigate their way out of foster care to life on their own.

One of our youth advocates recently told us that when a friend of hers turned 21 two years ago, the foster care agency with which he had been placed handed him his belongings in a plastic garbage bag and told him that he could either go to a shelter or to a friend's house. The choice was his.

As ACS rolled out its "Preparing Youth for Adulthood" initiative, such shameful scenarios were to have been relegated to the past. Yet, just last week, one of our social workers called the foster care worker for a client who will be 21 next month and has been in foster care for 10 years. For the last several years, the agency has repeatedly acknowledged before the family court that this young person has no resources available to him in the community. Far too close to his 21st birthday the agency assisted him in filling out Section 8 and NYCHA applications. Unfortunately, this housing is not going to become available before his birthday next week. His worker's response: the agency "does not want to be burnt" by ACS and keep him if ACS does not approve an exception to policy that would permit continued funding for his placement. She said "he can rent a room or stay with a relative until his NYCHA comes through."

Earlier this month, the Daily News reported that former foster children continue to be disproportionately represented among young adults with critical housing crises. In fact, the single largest group of youth served by covenant house are former foster

children. According to Covenant House, many of the 8000 teens who use their services "have two things in common: poverty and the foster care system." (NY Daily News, "Guiding Light for Homeless Teens," 2/11/08.) At a Citizen's Committee for Children policy briefing a few weeks ago, a Covenant House representative stated that a full 39% of their residents have come from the foster care system.

Last summer, we reviewed the case files of 823 of our clients between the ages of 18 and 21. Of those clients, only 94 (11%) had applied for the ACS Housing Subsidy, and only five (5) had received it. Of 141 (17%) youth who applied for NYCHA housing, only 12 had received apartments. And of the 143 (17%) who had applied for Section 8, only nine (9) received their vouchers.

LFC applauds your decision to hold another hearing addressing the needs of youth aging out of foster care. In each of the two prior hearings held this year, we expressed our grave concern that too many young people were aging out of foster care without an appropriate education, stable housing, employment or other income, medical coverage and a meaningful connection to an adult in their community. Each of these failures plays an enormous role in the prevalence of homelessness among youth aging out of care. Clearly, without an education, vocational training, and a reliable source of income, it is virtually impossible to obtain and maintain a stable place to live. There are, however, a number of concrete steps directly related to housing that must be taken immediately in order to stem the rising tide of homelessness among young people aging out of the foster care system.

In order to insure that youth aging out of care obtain appropriate housing, ACS must educate all caseworkers regarding the applicable laws, regulations and procedures

related to discharging young people from foster care. It is simply unacceptable to have caseworkers believe that youth can properly be discharged to a shelter, a rented room, or other accommodation that is not reasonably expected to last at least 12 months. Unfortunately, the members of the ACT Project are called upon time and again to prevent discharges to various offices and divisions of the Department of Homeless Services, and to educate agency workers about a rule of law that should be common knowledge.

In addition to educating caseworkers, ACS must educate young people -- long before they turn 18 -- about what they need to do to be eligible for public housing benefits. The information must be accurate and timely and ACS must make certain that the agency provides support to youth as they seek permanent housing.

ACS must insure that all foster care agencies are regularly provided with updates on any changes in policies and procedures that affect housing applications. This information must go beyond the housing liaisons at the agencies to all front line caseworkers and independent living specialists. Moreover, as the needs of this population are urgent and the required expertise is vast, agencies should be required to create entire divisions to focus specifically on youth aging out of care. In addition, the requirements for public housing eligibility are constantly changing without advance warning and without formal notice to the foster care agencies. As a result, rumor, myth, and misinformation guide the application process for many young people, causing far too many delays and rejections for young people who are about to age out of care.

For example, when the New York City Housing Authority established the priority for youth aging out of foster care in 2005, being enrolled in school full-time was sufficient to qualify, and a public assistance budget letter was sufficient proof of income

to complete an application. Unfortunately, as the volume of applications increased, the number of youth who qualified decreased as NYCHA narrowed the priority. The first category to be lost was youth who had aged out in the last 12 months, meaning that youth who had exited the system, whether properly discharged or not, were unable to access the priority. Now, youth must show between four to eight recent pay stubs, regardless of school enrollment, and public assistance is insufficient to meet the income requirement. We ask today that the City Council help us to help our youth, and advocate with us for a more inclusive priority, for a grace period before policy changes are implemented, and to broker a closer coordination of priorities and communication between ACS and NYCHA.

Similarly, there seems to be a lack of uniformity and quite a bit of confusion regarding ACS's housing subsidy. Although a subsidy of up to $300 per month should be available up to age 21, agencies regularly refuse to make the entire amount available to youth. Instead, they explain that they are withholding part of the subsidy to be used in the event that arrears accrue in the future. Many clients also complain that landlords will not hold an apartment empty during the many weeks it takes to process the ACS housing grant for first month's rent and security deposit. The process for obtaining this grant must be streamlined and standardized in order to ensure that youth obtain permanent housing.

In addition to clarifying the procedures and requirements for public housing and ACS's own housing subsidy, ACS should work to eliminate the restrictions on youth leaving foster care sharing their apartments with other appropriate individuals. As it stands, NYCHA and Section 8 refuse to grant priority to youth who are trying to apply with someone else. This means young men and women with children cannot form a

family unit without losing the priority. This means that youth, who may be living alone for the first time in their lives, are unable to have the comfort and support of a roommate. We urge the Council to help advocate for positive change in these policies.

ACS's own Housing Subsidy is not available to youth applying with a roommate, even if that roommate is another youth aging out of care. We urge you to advocate for an immediate reversal of this ACS policy, and to advocate for a change in NYCHA's policy as well. Youth should not be forced to live alone, especially when aging out and most in need of support and stability. Talk of setting up a roommate matching service should go beyond an idea into action.

If housing is so difficult for youth without any special needs or mental health diagnoses, it is even more complex for those who do have them. When clients are in need of additional support in order to be successfully discharged from foster care, they can apply for either supportive housing through the New York City Human Resources Administration ("HRA") and the New York State Office of Mental Health ("OMH"), or be referred for housing and services through the New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities ("OMRDD"). To the detriment of these youth, ACS has no direct relationship with OMH, and a difficult one with OMRDD, making locating placements within these systems time-consuming, cumbersome, and largely subject to the happenstance of whether the clients' particular worker is familiar with the system in question. Systems that could be working together to protect our youth are instead at odds and inefficient. We hope this Committee and the City Council will mandate that ACS and HRA cultivate smooth working relationships so that this population of special needs youth in foster care can live the productive and rewarding

lives that they deserve.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, when the complex and cumbersome process of aging out of foster care falters and a young person faces their 21st birthday with nowhere to live but the streets or a shelter, there can be no time wasted pointing fingers of responsibility. If an agency has failed to adequately plan with a young person for discharge, or ACS or any other government agency has failed to act in a timely fashion, the young person cannot be the one to pay the price. The real life experiences of young people leaving foster care demand a clear commitment from this City. ACS must meet its legal responsibility to insure that every young person leaving foster care has a permanent place to live that will last for at least 12 months, a stable source of income and access to healthcare.

At present, ACS has developed an opaque and cumbersome ad-hoc process of granting "exceptions to policy" to a small number of youth who are on the precipice of aging out to homelessness. This practice is purely discretionary, is not evenly applied, and the decision whether to extend placement is often not made until after the placement lapses. This must change. ACS must fulfill its legal responsibility and publish a comprehensive set of guidelines for addressing this urgent crisis. This City cannot in good conscience abandon the children it has raised simply because the calendar indicates that they have reached age 21. Our City must continues to provide assistance, through ACS, to any child, even past their 21st birthday, to insure that our youth are not leaving foster care to live on the streets of New York, or worse.

* * *

Thank you. I welcome any questions the Council members would like to ask.

Testimony presented by:

Glenn Metsch Ampel, Deputy Executive Director
Angelique Wilson, Youth Advocate
Lawyers for Children, Inc.
110 Lafayette Street
New York, NY 10013
(212) 966-6420 (telephone)
(212) 966-0531 (fax)

Additional Contact Information:

Karen J. Freedman, Esq.
Executive Director
Lawyers For Children, Inc.
110 Lafayette Street
New York, NY 10013
(212) 966-6420 (telephone)
(212) 966-0531 (fax)
E-mail: kfreedman@lawyersforchildren.org

You Gotta Believe!
The Older Child Adoption & Permanency Movement, Inc.

MAILING ADDRESS:
1728 Mermaid Avenue
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11224
(800) 601-1779
ygbpat@msn.com
www.yougottabelieve.org

LOCATIONS:
1728 Mermaid Avenue
(at West 19th Street)
Coney Island, N.Y. 11224
(718) 372-3003
Fax: (718) 372-3033

150A Long Island Avenue
Holtsville, N.Y. 11742
(631) 654-7970
Fax: (631) 654-7980

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A FAMILY IS NOWHERE

TESTIMONY BEFORE

A Joint Convening of New York City Council's

General Welfare Committee
Chaired by Councilmember Bill de Blasio

&

Youth Services Committee
Chaired by Councilmember Lewis Fidler

Tuesday February 26th, 2008
City Hall @ 1pm.

Examining The Department of Youth and Community Development's (CYCD's) and The Administration for Children's Services's (ACS's) Efforts to Prevent Youth Aging out of Foster Care From Becoming Homeless

YOU GOTTA BELIEVE!
The Older Child Adoption & Permanency Movement, Inc.
1728 Mermaid Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11224
1-800-601-1779, 718-372-3003, 718-372-3033 (Fax)
ygbpat@msn.com (e-mail) www.yougottabelieve.org (web)

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS AND THE LACK OF ADOPTIVE AND OTHER PERMANENT PARENTAL PLANNING FOR TEENS IN FOSTER CARE:

PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS THROUGH PARENTING

I would like to start out my discussion concerning youth homelessness and the lack of parental planning (i.e. a discharge from foster care to an adoptive or other permanent parent) for older foster children by pointing out the homeless youth problem we face right here in N.Y.C. which is true in many other parts of the Country as well:

- *The Coalition for the Homeless had reported to then Mayor Dinkins that 60% of the homeless in NYC Municipal Shelters have some history of foster care.* **(1)**

- *Shaffer and Canton found in their study "Runaway and Homeless Youth in N.Y.C." that 50% of the homeless young people who came to shelters had previously lived in a setting provided by the Child Welfare system; in a foster home, a group home, or other child care institution.* **(2)**

- *Out of 168 youth interviewed for a study at Covenant House, one of the few in N.Y.C., and the only youth shelter that accepted 18, 19, and 20 year olds, 27% reported having spent time with a foster parent and 43% reported spending time in foster group homes.* **(3)**

On a nationwide level, the following have been reported:

- *The National Association of Social Workers conducted a national survey of shelters for runaway and homeless youth and found that 38% of the youths surveyed had been in foster care at some time during the* ***previous*** *year alone. An additional 11% had arrived from another runaway or crisis shelter accounting for a total of 49% coming from some out-of-home facility in the previous year.* **(4)**

- *On January 6, 1991 the New York Times reported in a front page Sunday story that "a large and disproportionate number of the Nation's homeless are young people who have come out of foster care programs without the money, skills, or family support to make it on their own.* **(5)**

- *In a report prepared by the National Alliance to End Homelessness they found "there is an* ***over-representation*** *of people with a foster care history in the homeless population" and that homeless parents with a foster care history are three times more likely than homeless parents who did not grow up in foster care to have* ***their own children in foster care.*** **(6)**

- *In an analysis conducted by the Urban Institute, 61% of homeless youth under the age of 20 reported having been placed in foster care, Group Home, or other Institution before the age of 18.* **(7)**

And what about youths due to be discharged from the foster care system? The Citizen's Committee for Children found this:

- *Forty-nine percent (49%) of the children with goals of independent living and nearing their discharge date, had no plan in their record indicating what their living arrangements would be upon discharge from the foster care system and that this was true for 58% of the boys.*

- *CCC also found that 65% of all youths living in foster homes with the goal of independent living had no plan for what their living arrangement would be upon discharged from foster care and that only 13% of their foster parents were identified as potential resources.* **(8)**

So, what does all this have to do with permanent relationships for teens via relationally planning for them before their discharge from foster care? Well, when one considers the plight of the young homeless noted above, and then one considers the plight of the nearly discharged foster child with the **permanency planning goal** of "Independent Living" or APPLA also noted above, one must begin to wonder what it is we are doing as a system to our children in the name of **"Child Welfare."** We are, in actuality, creating half the homeless population in our City and our Country by not taking on the responsibility of finding permanent parents and families for these teens while they are still in our foster care. Let's explore.

I. WORKING CLASS YOUTH IN FAMILIES VS FOSTER CARE YOUTH DISCHARGEES

WORKING CLASS YOUTH IN FAMILIES:

Child development theorists are now viewing adolescence in today's society in two developmental stages: **stage one** from age 13 to 17 and **stage two** from ages 18 to 25 and beyond. The reasons are many-fold. Consider the following:

- *Our own, yours and my, anecdotal experience tells us that many young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 who come from fairly well off home environments and intact families, and who even manage to get through college, find themselves still living with their parents until their mid to late 20's.*

- *To back up our own unempirical anecdotal experience consider an article that appeared on the front page of the Sunday New York Times on June 16, 1991 when it reported that 32% of single men (and 20% of single women) between the ages of* ***25 and 34*** *were living with their parents during the year preceding the article.* **(9).**

- *In another article in the* **Employment Press** *it was reported that in the northeast in the past 10 years the economy has completely shifted from an industrial one to a service orientated one. This transition has left almost all young men who are living in working class urban communities unemployed and unemployable. These young men do not even have the skills for the jobs available where they will eventually be able to work their way up to a descent $30,000 per year middle class wage with benefits unless they are willing to go for training in traditionally "female" service industry jobs such as teaching, nursing, or secretarial type of positions."* **(10)**

- *Also consider a recent book written by Christopher Jencks simply entitled* **The Homeless.** *The author identifies a very significant fact about the homeless:*

"When unmarried adults get into economic trouble, parents are usually their first line of defense against homelessness. 5.6 million unmarried working-age adults had incomes below $2,500. Forty two percent of them lived with their parents, compared to only 9 percent of unmarried adults with income above $30,000. The contrast leaves little doubt that the main reason unmarried adults live with their parents is economic. It also shows how important parents are in keeping younger adults off the street, especially today when the income differential between the young and their elders is widening." (11)

So, why are these young adults, predominately working class but even many middle class, prolonging their adolescence by living with their parents well into their mid-to-late 20's? Because they cannot possibly afford to live on the salaries they are making, assuming they are making any salary at all. Thank goodness they have parents and families to help out.

FOSTER CARE YOUTH DISCHARGEES:

Now lets compare the 18, 19, 20, or 21 year old foster care youth discharged from foster care, possibly with a high school diploma, but probably not, and having **no permanent parents in his or her life.** How is this youth – with no place to call home – going to survive in our society? Well let's look at a survey published by the Foster Care Youth United that highlights some of the concerns and fears of the young people themselves who were still residing in foster care. Of the 12 youths who responded to the question **"If You Left Foster Care Tomorrow, What Would Be Your Biggest Worry?"** (12) Eight of them specifically expressed fears about their living situation in one way or another upon discharge from the system. Some of their responses were as follows:

- *"If I left the group home, my biggest worry would be ending up on the street with no job and no place to live." Kiesha, age 18.*
- *"My biggest worry would be living my life. Once I'm out on the street, I'll have no control over my reaction to circumstances beyond my control, and being that my life is my most important possession, losing control of it would be very frightful." Mathew Dedewo, 18.*
- *"I guess my biggest worry would be how I'm going to support myself now that I'm on my own. And If I have a job that don't pay me enough money for me to get my own apartment, where am I gonna live? How am I gonna find an apartment that rents for a low price?" Angi, 16*
- *"If I had to leave foster care tomorrow, my biggest worry be becoming homeless. That's a fear that I'm sure people in foster care have. To wonder where I'm going to sleep and where my next meal is coming from and, most of all, wondering will I die on the streets." Kenyetta Ivy, 18*
- *"My biggest worry would be finding a place to live, because if I got discharged I wouldn't go back to my parents and most shelters are filled tight with people anyway." Keith Saliski, 19.*
- *"my biggest worry would be getting a job and then an apartment." Latrice, 19.*
- *"My biggest worry would be how to support myself and where I would go. This is why I don't get too dependent on foster care and do things for myself." Shaniqua Gray, 16.*
- *"If I left the group home, my biggest worry would be how I would survive without the help I need."*

Consider also a recent documentary entitled ***Aging Out*** which aired on PBS stations across the United States on Thursday night May 26th, 2005. (13) The documentary feature three stories about four youth aging out of care, capturing the tail end of their foster care stay and a period of time after they aged out of foster care to no one but themselves. Out of the four youth featured, two have already died (Risa Bejarano and David Griffin) while one of the other two youth (who happen to be married to each other) finds himself in harms way serving in Iraq.

So, what happens to youth upon their discharge from foster care? We fear that for far too many of them if it is not the local homeless shelter, it may be prison; if it is not drugs, it may be alcohol; if it is not prostitution, it may be hooking up with an abusive significant other; if it is not dying from homicide it may be dying from suicide; if its not psychiatric hospitalization, it may be hospitalization for life threatening diseases. We fear that for far too many of these young people, like Risa and David noted above, will die at way too young an age.

And these children would not be fairing well due solely to their "house"lessness. These children would not be fairing well because the child welfare system in our country had not taken it upon itself to help these children develop a lasting permanent parent and family in their lives while they were still in foster care. The system basically says to a child, "Oh, you're 14? We're not going to terminate your parents' rights. You're far too old for that sort of thing. We'll just give you this fabulous goal of 'Independent Living' or "APPLA" and send you on your way when you are, say, 18, 19, 20, or 21." This is the true source of half the homelessness in this City and Country. But before we go into how it is that the child welfare permanency planning goal of Independent Living or "APPLA" actually creates half the homelessness in this country, let us first explore some of the myths about why there are homeless on our streets to begin with.

II. Where Do the Homeless Come From? Some Common Myths.

Many of us have experienced what it is like to walk down the street in our respective neighborhoods or places of work and have to walk around, over, or through the living dead referred to as "the homeless" in our big cities. Many of us know what it is like not being able to walk a three block radius without being approached three or four times by different people begging for money. Some of us know the awkward feeling of walking down the street with our child and trying to explain why the homeless exist when the child asks us the innocent question "where do the homeless come from Daddy" like my daughter did one day walking to work together.

The general wisdom of most homeless "experts" is that the homeless exist for the following reasons:

1) **Unemployment:** People are homeless because of a lack of jobs. Though there is an element of truth to this, we still must ask the question "why does unemployment lead to the homelessness of any given individual?" We all know unemployed people who are not homeless.

2) **Poverty:** People are homeless because of overwhelming and oppressive poverty. Clearly there is an element of truth to this as well. But we must still ask "why does poverty lead to the homelessness of any given individual?" Most of us know poverty stricken people who are not homeless.

3) **Alcohol & Other Drug Addictions:** People are homeless because of their addictions and abuse of substances. Again, there is an element of truth to this, but we must still ask "why does addiction lead to the homelessness of any given individual?" Almost all of us know addicted people who are not homeless.

4) **Mental Illness:** People are homeless because of deinstitutionalization which leads to the homelessness of the mentally ill. And even though there is some truth to this, we still must ask "why is any given mentally ill person who might have been deinstitutionalized homeless?" Many of us know mentally ill people who are not homeless.

These four factors cited above and the four questions that followed them are extremely important because the answer to each of them is the same. The answer to each question noted above has been left out of every homelessness analysis ever done, even though the answer is the same for 100% of the homeless. And that answer, or most important factor when one considers homelessness, is:

5) **Lack of Relationships:** People are homeless because they have no functioning human relationships in their lives. It is not just their unemployment, poverty, addictions, or mental illnesses that make them homeless; it is any of these factors combined with the fact that they have no functioning human relationships in their lives, be it with a parent figured, spouse, adult child, close friend, or other family relationship.

This knowledge is disheartening because, as we noted earlier, half of this could have been prevented. Half the homeless could have had the opportunities that relationships bring had we not had a federally sanctioned, State and locally enforced *"permanency planning"* goal called *"Independent Living"* or *APPLA* that allows teenagers as young as 14 to sign their lives away to that **never ever** land of impermanency called *"Independent Living."* **"Never ever"** because in this economy there is a high likelihood that these teens, upon discharge from the system, will **never ever** get a job or **never ever** find a permanent place to call home without a functioning human relationship recruited for them before their discharge from the foster care system.

III. INDEPENDENT LIVING Vs *INTER*DEPENDENT LIVING

This is where relationships are crucially important. Relational planning, or the developing of a permanent lasting relationship with at least one unconditionally committed claiming parent, is the primary hope for our older foster care youth. ***You Gotta Believe!*** is now beginning to turn aside the myth that there are no families who want to unconditionally claim older foster children as their own. There are many many families out there who want to parent teenage foster children. Many of them don't even have the youth move in until they already have turned 18. In addition to all the families we find who are unknown to the children that we ultimately place them with, there are also many families out there who are already in a child's life who would be willing to parent the child as well if they were approached in an appropriate and sensitive way.

This includes people who know the older foster child they want to parent – people such as the child's social worker, the child's school teacher, the child's paraprofessional, the child's volunteer, or the child's best friend's parent. We have made placements of children with all of the above as well as with their very own unexplored biological relatives such as aunts, grandparents, siblings, and cousins on **both** the maternal side and paternal side of the family. Melanie Tem, in a paper she delivered at a NACAC conference in 1985, wrote that even though "there is considerable support for the notion that most of us {people in Society in general} have 'attachment' problems to some degree" that we nonetheless know that "an individual who truly has no attachments does not survive." (14) If there is one positive thing we can say about kids in foster care is that they are alive and they are survivors. Hence, you can't tell us that a youth who has lived to the ripe old age of 16, 17, 18, 19, or older does not have some attachments in his or her life who might be very responsive to learning more about bringing the child permanently into their home. And if the system would do away with its homelessness causing loophole it defines as a *"permanency planning goal"* for the child, *"Independent Living"*, it would be forced to come up with creative forms of recruitment like what we just mentioned and accept the responsibility of finding **"Inter**dependent Living" relationships for all its children rather than "Independent Living."

Perhaps the greatest line in Hillary Clinton's book **<u>It Takes A Village</u>** is the first line of the book that simply reads "children are not rugged individualists." (15) This concept of *"Independent Living"* is a very upper class American creation that was hopefully never developed to apply to children or young adults who can not possibly survive on their own. The whole concept of *"Independent Living"* implies we should be raising our children, while they are still children, as rugged individualists. But who in this society can live "Independently"? Any why is that so desirable anyway? I'm a grown man well into his 50's and I can tell you that I have yet to have been discharged to *"Independent Living."* I would have found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, raising a family on my own without the benefit of a second income. I always needed to live in an **"Inter**dependent" relationship with my partner. And I have always lived in **Inter**dependent relationships: with my parents until I was 25 and with my partner since I was 25. And when I fell upon financially hard times after a divorce, my parents were still there to help out.

So, what do we expect our older children in foster care to learn about *"Independent Living"* anyway? As far as I am concerned, for any working class youth living in any neighborhood to live "independently" in our big cities is close to impossible. This economy is **not good** for young people no matter how well it's thriving for Wall Street. We need to teach our young people **"Inter**dependent Living" skills and there is no better way to teach a child aging out of foster care to live **inter**dependently, to live in relational growth with other human beings, than to find a permanent parent and family for each and every one of them **before** they are discharged from the foster care system.

IV. WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Child permanency advocates such as the Board, staff, and volunteers at ***You Gotta Believe!*** are beginning to change the attitudes of many child welfare professionals about the relationability of every teen and pre-teen in their foster care barring no one. In addition, however, we also need to recommend some systematic changes that will hopefully begin to change the structure of the system from one that currently allows for a *"permanency planning"* goal of *"Independent Living"* to one that will not consider discharging any child from its care without an **"inter**dependent living" relationship with at least one unconditionally committed permanent parent.

1) ABOLISH THE "PERMANENCY" *GOAL* OF INDEPENDENT LIVING!

If a child has a goal of *"Independent Living"* this means that the child's birthparents failure to plan for their future is so clear cut that the system changed the child's goal to discharge to no one but themselves via the goal of "Independent Living." If he is not going to return home to his birthparents, his birthparents' rights should be terminated and he should be freed for adoption. The child should under no circumstances, as is permitted for 14 year olds in New York State, be allowed to sign a waiver stating he doesn't want to be adopted and that he wants his permanency planning goal changed to *"Independent Living."* This is akin to asking a child to sign his own homelessness warrant and, in some cases, to sign his own death warrant.

What can 14 year olds do in this society anyway?

- Can they sign a legally binding contract?
- Can they work at any job during the school year?
- Can they serve their country in a time of war?
- Can they vote?
- Can they go to a bar or local deli and buy a beer?
- Can they drive a car?

The answer to all of the above is, of course, **NO!!!!!**

But can this same 14 year old sign a piece of paper stating that he does not want to be adopted, thereby having his permanency plan goal changed to *"Independent Living,"* thereby relieving the system of any responsibility to identify a permanent lasting **inter**dependent relationship for him? The answer to this question is a resounding --- **YES!!!**

So, why does such a destructive permanency planning goal as *"Independent Living"* exist in the first place? Ironically, the answer to this question is: **Children's Rights!!!** Yes. The theory goes that a child has a right **not** to be adopted. "No one should ever force a child to be adopted," they say. **And, of course this is true.** It is just that we want every child to have the right to turn down Mr. And Mrs. Jones, not a nebulous abstract concept such as adoption. When we change the child's goal to *"Independent Living"* we are saying to the child, "we are not even going to introduce Mr. and Mrs. Jones to you." This family is the very family that would make a lifetime commitment to the youth and prevent the youth from becoming homeless upon his or her discharge from the foster care system.

It is natural and understandable for any child who has been bounced around the foster care system to say at 14 she doesn't want to be adopted. Why should she invite potential pain and suffering? The system has trained her that she's too old to be adopted anyway. Why should she actually believe she is adoptable? No one around her believes it. She must protect herself by stating she does not want to be "adopted." But ask her if she wants to **belong** somewhere. Ask her if she will meet Mr. and Mrs. Jones. Her reply will be a lot different than if you ask her if she wants to be adopted. All children want to belong somewhere. **All human beings want to belong somewhere.**

However, if the child is not made available for adoption, we will never know whether, if we worked extra hard, would we be able to identify a permanent parent for him. Perhaps even the home of someone he already knows. Perhaps even a biological relative who simply would not present self as a resource or interfere in child's life until the birthparents' rights were terminated. I have had the experience of placing a number of children with biological relatives who have fallen into this category.

Indeed, in many ways "adoption" is both the best *"Independent Living"* and the best *"another planned permanent living arrangement"* program ever invented.

2) EVERY CHILD WITH A GOAL OF INDEPENDENT LIVING SHOULD BE FREED FOR ADOPTION NO MATTER WHAT THE CHILD'S AGE.

It is age discrimination at its most destructive worse when the child's age influences the decision of the court or child welfare bureaucracy to not move forward toward the termination of a birthparents' parental rights. If a child's permanency goal is *"Independent Living"* rather than discharge to a birthparent, then there is no birthparent who is permanently planning for that child's discharge from foster care.

This means the child is **legally** allowed to stay in a legal limbo. We technically can't find an adoptive home for the child because the child is not freed for adoption. Why do we not, then, at least free for adoption every child with a goal of *"Independent Living"* who is not ever going to be discharged to a birthparent? In this area we find usually very legalistic judges talking very much like the social workers they so often express much contempt for. Judges will ask "why should we terminate a parent's rights and disallow a child access to his birth parent when the child is very unlikely to get adopted." The judge will ask this question even in cases where the parents' failure to plan is so clear-cut that the child is going to age out of the foster care system to homelessness. The CATCH 22 is, of course, how can we get a child adopted if the child is not freed for adoption? However, in this one of the very few instances that our Family Court judges put down their legal gloves and view the case the way, say, a social worker might, they happen to have a very good point.

Why should any child be deprived of the right to see his birthparents simply because his birthparents' rights have been terminated? Who says that just because a parent's rights are terminated that a child cannot see his birthparents anymore, particularly if the child has no adoptive resources on the horizon? Well, children's rights advocates hear this! Its true, under the law as it stands now, a foster child does not have the right to see his birthparent after the parent's rights have been terminated, and this has got to change.

3) LAWS SHOULD BE CHANGED TO ALLOW FOSTER CHILDREN THE RIGHT TO SEE THEIR BIRTHPARENTS BETWEEN THE TIME OF TERMINATION AND ADOPTIVE PLACEMENT.

No birthparent should have the right to keep his or her child in a legal limbo that will ultimately lead to the child's homelessness. This is giving too much power and control to a person who has no right to such power and control due to their inability to plan for the child's future. However, does this mean that the reverse be true? Does this mean that the child should **not** have a right to see his birthparents solely because his parent's rights were terminated?

It should be every child's legal right, up to the time of an adoptive placement, and perhaps even after, that the child have access to his birthparents if **the child** so desires the relationship. Child Rights Activists should jump on the bandwagon to give children this right and to effectively advocate for their parents' rights to be terminated. This is the primary issue Law Guardians and Judges raise at termination hearings in cases where the birthparents' failure to plan is clear-cut. If the child has the right to see his parents after termination this issue would become moot. Let's give the child the power and control and not leave this power and control with a birthparent who cannot parent the child enough to plan for the child's future and prevent the child from becoming homeless upon discharge from the foster care system.

And, of course, it is wise, even after an adoptive placement, that every child that had communication with his or her biological relatives be allowed to continue this communications afterwards. It is virtually impossible, and highly inadvisable, to prevent any older child from having communication with people in his or her past life, particularly if these people are his biological relatives. After an excellent 30 hour pre-placement training, like our program requires before anyone ever adopts a teen, most prospective parents are in tune with this when it is safe for the child to have contact after a placement.

4) MAKE RECRUITING PERMANENT PARENTS & FAMILIES A CONDITION OF ANY FUNDING THAT IS GIVEN FOR ANY OF ACS'S PREPARING YOUTH FOR ADULTHOOD (PYA) PROGRAMS CONCURRENT PLANNING AT THE EXIT END OF THE SYSTEM

New York City's Administration for Children's Services recently released a *Child Welfare Services with Community Coalitions Concept Paper* in order to help frame and give purpose to the $650,000,000 worth of Request for Proposals it expects to release in 2008 for the implementation of services to children and families in 2009. In this concept paper ACS did note that one of its major principles, goals, and expectation that will drive its design and delivery of services will include *"increasing the number of older adolescents who are discharged from foster care each year to families* ***and*** *improving the effectiveness of services to prepare youth for adulthood so they have the education and work skills that they need to achieve independent living.* One of the City's major initiatives is a concept they are calling ***Preparing Youth For Adulthood (or PYA.)*** The goals of PYA for all youth before they are discharged from foster care include:

- **Youth will have permanent connections with caring adults.**
- **Youth will reside in stable living situations.**
- **Youth will be afforded opportunities to advance their education and personal development.**
- **Youth will be encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their work and life decisions, and their positive decisions are reinforced.**
- **Young people's individual needs will be met.**
- **Youth will have ongoing support after they age out of care.** (16)

Do you know how difficult all of the above goals will be to achieve for the average 18, 19, 20, or 21 year old with out a permanent unconditionally committed parent, ***a real parent,*** in their corner who will remain committed to them long after their years in foster care are over? Having a "permanent connection with a caring adult" is a nice enough idea, but it's ***a real parent*** that will see to it that this "permanent connection" will stick long past the youth's years in foster care are over. Stating that youths "will reside in stable living situations" is a nice statement but having ***a real parent*** who will offer the youth a safety net long after their years in foster care are over is what will make it happen. Parents prevent homelessness. How can one possibly afford a youth the opportunity to receive advanced

education or personal development if there is not ***a real parent*** helping create those opportunities in a non-time pressured environment; just like the environment the rest of the youth in the United States of America live in if they did not happen to grow up in foster care? Who encourages and reinforces "youth to take increasing responsibility for their work and life decisions" if not ***real parents?*** Who will see to it that any young person's "individual needs are met" if not ***real parents***? And most of all, who will provide a youth with any "ongoing support after they age out of foster care" if not ***real parents?***

The flaw, then, in this PYA concept paper is that it does not *mandate* the concurrent funding of a constant, on-going, never stopping, never ending, all out effort to recruit youth moral and legally adoptive parents until their very last day in foster care. Almost all of the good ideas PYA offers in its goals are offered in lieu of family. Almost all of the PYA goals above assume teens and young adults will not get parents and families before they age out of care. Parents and family are the **only answer** for these youth and we must make a commitment to never stop looking until that youth's, or young adult's, very last day in our care. We as a bureaucracy owe every child and youth that concurrent effort!

CONCLUSION

There is a clear-cut connection between youth homelessness and the lack of adoptive and other permanent parental planning for teens and pre-teens in foster care. There are issues that we outlined here that should be looked at into eliminating the bureaucratic and legal obstacles to finding teens permanent parents and families before they age out of care.

However, the major obstacle will continue to be the belief of almost everyone that finding permanent homes for teens is rare and that these teens are very hard, if not impossible, to place. People often want to know that their belief systems are right. People want to know that the things they believe in are, indeed, correct. This brings to mind a favorite quote of mine by Henry Ford:

If you think you can – you can!
If you think you can't – you can't!
You're always right!

If you happen to believe teens are unrelationable, unfortunately you are right. If you happen to be in charge of planning for a teen's future and you believe the teen is unrelationable and that a home cannot be found, then the teen becomes unrelationable and a home will not be found. But always please keep in mind a home was not found because that is what **you believe.**

On the other hand, if you happen to believe every teen you have planning responsibility for is relationable, then you are right too. If you believe this teen is relationable, a permanent parent and family can be found for that child. But always keep in mind that the reason the child got a permanent family was because that is what **you believed.**

The writer of this testimony believes in the relationability of all teens in foster care without exception. A family can be found for every child. I believed this because our program was able to recruit permanent parents and families for nearly 250 teenagers, average age of 16, during the past 7 years we have been placing teens and young adults for New York City. We became such advocates for the permanent placement of teens that we went out and started an agency that we refer to as "a movement" called **YOU GOTTA BELIEVE! THE OLDER CHILD ADOPTION & PERMANENCY MOVEMENT. Inc.** ***YOU GOTTA BELIEVE*** makes placements for any teen or young adult in foster care who needs a permanent family without regard to whether that child is freed for adoption or not. We simply believe that all children deserve permanent parents and families who will be there for them long after their years in foster care are over and we set out to find a home for every one of these youth who need one. And that is why it was essential for us to call our movement "You Gotta Believe!"

Believing is contagious. What you believe is always right. Why not choose to believe in the positive over the negative? It's your choice. Choose to believe in the relationability of every teen and young adult and there will be a dramatic reduction in the homeless population in our City and Country. Fight to get rid of the goal of "independent living" so that the system is obligated to continuously find permanent parents for every youth up to the date of that youth's discharge from the foster care system. Short of achieving this goal, fight for the inclusion of recruiting permanent parents and families as the single best way to *prepare youth for adulthood* when Request For Proposals are issued offering funding to service teens in the area of helping to plan for them long after their years in foster care are over.

And always remember:

A
FAMILY
ISNOWHERE

Do you see "A Family is No Where?" Or do you see "A Family is Now Here?" You see, we all can see the exact same thing but see something entirely different. That is why we at **YOU GOTTA BELIEVE** will always choose to believe and see that "A Family is Now Here" in every child's life. Join us in believing and help our movement reduce the homeless population in half.

This testimony was written by Pat O'Brien, M.S., LMSW, Executive Director of You Gotta Believe! The Older Child Adoption & Permanency Movement, Inc. Pat can be reached at 1-718-372-3003 (e-mail, ygbpat@msn.com***) if anyone is interested in speaking with him about the contents of this paper or about having Pat come to you town, committee, or agency to talk about the ideas he expressed in this paper.***

NOTES

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15) Clinton, Hillary 1996 It Takes A Village pg.1

16) New York City Administration for Children's Services - June 2006 - *"Preparing Youth for Adulthood"* a 29 page downloadable concept paper that can be obtained by going to www.nyc.gov/acs.

To learn more about the need for permanent parents for teens and young adults in foster care you can listen to our live radio call-in show ***"The Adopting Teens & 'Tweens Radio Forum"*** *every Sunday evening from 8-9pm (Eastern Time) by logging on to www.am1240wgbb.com. You can also watch a live-stream of our weekly cable access television show entitled* ***"The Adopting Teens & 'Tweens Show"*** *every Thursday at 12 noon and 8pm (Eastern Time) by logging on to www.bcat.tv/bcat and then click on the television with the #2 inside it under the words "Watch BCAT Live." Our e-mail address is ygbpat@msn.com Our address is You Gotta Believe, 1728 Mermaid Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11224. Our website is www.yougottabelieve.org.*

We are here Examining Efforts to Prevent Youth Aging Out of Foster Care from Becoming Homeless. ***The solution to this problem is family****. The youth in care can achieve growth, empowerment, self-esteem and success in a family. Family is the only single system that can prevent homelessness; it's the only place where you can fail until you succeed. It provides stability. Stability gives the youth in care the ability to focus on success. Just imagine having to worry about where you will sleep or eat the next day or when you age out of care. Stability in a family will also give them the opportunity to focus on their education and their mental health. If you or someone you know is questioning what I am saying; just ask your self and them theses following questions: Who do you call at the end of a good or bad day?, Who attended your graduation, your wedding or baby shower? Who did you call when you got a promotion at your job or when you got fired from a job? Life begins at 18.The children and young adults in foster care already have a disadvantage,* ***lets provide them with the best possible system to make up for it, A family.***

Anni Keane.