

Good Afternoon Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, Subcommittee, and guests on this Hearing on Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care. My name is Rebekka Behr, and I am here to share the challenges of my journey through foster care, and advocate for improvements. At 25, I stand before you as a graduate of The Florida State University, holding degrees in Family & Child Sciences and Sociology. With an extensive background in the intricacies of the foster care system and a nuanced comprehension of the challenges confronting youth grappling with homelessness, I devote a substantial portion of my time to advocating for the rights of young people experiencing the foster care system.

Throughout the years I have had the opportunity to participate in many local, statewide, and national advocacy organizations such as the National Foster Youth Institute, National Youth Engagement Advisory Council and Florida Youth SHINE. Today I stand before you as a committed representative on behalf of the National Foster Youth Institute.

My journey in foster care, began abruptly at the age of 16, where I was called out of class and taken away from the only life that I knew without a single explanation - with only a promise of taking me back to my school to grab my school bag before taking me home to my dad and brother - a promise that never happened. As my family faced challenges, the foster care system further divided us. While my brother and I entered foster care, my sisters stayed with my mom. This separation deprived us of sibling connections, and I lost out on a supportive family during crucial years. It took six years post-foster care to rebuild my relationship with my little sister, and I still maintain cautious connections with my mom due to the scars left by the system.

Entering care, I was taken to a shelter where there was constant police involvement, a lack of basic necessities such as clothes, transportation to school, and the ability to see my siblings. I had gone from living with my family, who needed minimal services, to a shelter where I never felt safe and felt that I had nobody. I was not given the opportunity to live with a relative, although multiple relatives lived nearby and I remained in this shelter for 3 months.

I did not know that I had the right to see my siblings, go to school, or speak with my judge. Unfortunately, there is a constant high turnover rate of Case Managers, and I only knew the name of my first Case Manager. However, I never had the opportunity to meet one or understand the role of a Case Manager until I moved into my second placement. In transitioning to my second placement, I appreciated the move to a more secure environment where I felt safer. However, it's crucial to note that even though I was in a setting that allowed me to attend school daily, have clean clothes, and participate in weekly Life Skills courses, I still lacked the crucial support of a loving family. While I learned essential life skills such as budgeting, understanding the nuances of renting versus buying, and navigating the bus system in Palm Beach, it's important to highlight that such comprehensive services are not often accessible when residing in a group home.

Moreover, it's noteworthy that many group homes are religious-based, which can limit placement options for young individuals of different religious backgrounds. As a person of Jewish faith, I recognize the challenges this presents, as finding a place where one feels comfortable and accepted can be more challenging. I am particularly thankful that my brother was placed in a foster home, even though he wasn't with family, as it provided a more personalized and supportive environment.

Adding to the complexities, my brother and I were not given the option to live together, further emphasizing the lack of control we had over our living arrangements within the foster care system. We had gone from seeing each other every day to once a week for one hour which was often cut short or canceled if there wasn't transportation available.

With January being National Mentoring Month, I cherish the opportunity to highlight the transformative impact of mentorship in the foster care system. For almost a decade, my mentor Daniele, a product of a Mentoring Program I joined during my second placement, has been instrumental in my personal development. From supporting me through heartbreaks to guiding me in opening my first bank account, ensuring my preparation for prom, and providing unwavering support, Daniele has been a constant presence in my life. An unforgettable moment crystallized the importance of mentorship when my friend canceled on me for a movie outing. Distraught, I called Daniele, who not only comforted me but took me to spend time with her family on the beach, revealing the depth of her commitment. This incident not only marked the realization that genuine friends stand by each other but also sparked my passion for lifeguarding, a pursuit in which I compete and remain certified.

Even though my mentor refuses to let anyone drive, she helped me practice driving which was huge for me. I had taken and passed the drivers permit test at the earliest age possible in Florida - 14.5. Unfortunately, I had turned 16 right before I entered the foster care system and did not have the ability to get my license before entering care. Due to difficulties gaining my Birth Certificate and Social Security Card from my biological mom, I was unable to get my driver's license until right before I turned 18 due to a lack of legal representation - I did not know that I could even speak in the courtroom. Florida, at the time, had just passed legislation that created a Pilot Program called "Keys to Independence," which was passed with the assistance of Florida Youth SHINE Advocates. This program assists with gaining driver's licenses, insurance, and other assistance. Although I did not benefit from this, I educate others on this program and know others that benefit from it as it eliminates burdens in getting to college, work, and obstacles we face.

At 17, I attended a transitional case plan meeting to discuss my approaching 18th birthday. Unfortunately, the meeting was short-lived, and I didn't realize I could bring third-party support.

The person leading the meeting claimed my presence diverted resources from other children and suggested I should return home to my mom. This surprised me, as I wasn't aware that going back home was an option. I expressed my discomfort, explaining that my Judge or Case Managers had never presented this choice, but the person seemed indifferent. The emotional impact left me in tears, feeling unsupported in navigating this transition, with my mentor being the only source of assistance, as I lacked representation in the courtroom.

When I was 3 months out before turning 18, I had the opportunity to visit the Florida Supreme Court and meet a Supreme Court Justice who told the group I was with - Florida Youth Leadership Academy, that most young people in Palm Beach County had attorneys. For me, that was not the case. So I waited for the meeting to be done before speaking to the Justice and tell her about my situation. She asked me a single question - who was my judge? Before stating that tomorrow I will have an attorney. The very next day I received a phone call from my attorney. Gaining legal representation became a game-changer - ensuring that I obtained a driver's license, had the ability to see my family more, and that I aged out of care as a successful adult.

I am a determined, successful adult. Albeit remaining in extended foster care until I went off to college as I was told to be grateful that I could remain there and did not know that I was even allowed to leave, I found my way to college through the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement Program at Florida State University. I graduated in 2020 with 2 Bachelor Degrees because of the assistance I received from amazing programs such as Best Foot Forward - who provided me with tutoring assistance, assisting me with the FAFSA, a cell phone to assist me in college, and even helping me with moving scholarship funds around so I had financial support in the summer. The Unconquered Scholars Program - a program that assists students that have experienced foster care, homelessness, relative care, or ward of the state status that allows us to have our study space, a food pantry/grocery store runs, and a campus liaison who we gained 1-to-1 support and who I get coffee with even now 4 years later.

In my sophomore year of college, my Independent Case Manager, Mike from Vita Nova, introduced me to Florida Youth SHINE—a youth-led, peer-driven organization for those in or who have experienced foster care or homelessness. FYS, known for advocacy, played a pivotal role in passing significant bills like the Normalcy Bill and Keys to Independence in Florida. Over the past 5 years, our focus has been on raising awareness about the rights and resources unknown to youth in care, such as communicating with judges, obtaining driver's licenses, and enjoying normalcy in life.

In 2023, we achieved a milestone by passing the Nancy C. Detert Champion for Children Act in Florida, ensuring regular education for youth about their rights and resources. Thanks to Champions Senator Garcia and Representative Tramont, this act marks a crucial step in empowering young individuals as they age out of the system. Youth Advocacy Organizations,

such as this, are vital for driving changes at the local and statewide levels. We are fortunate to have multiple organizations focusing on national advocacy, like The National Foster Youth Institute, dedicated to ensuring that current and former foster youth have a seat at the table alongside legislators, policymakers, decision-makers, families, and advocates.

Incorporating individuals with lived expertise from the foster care system into discussions with legislators and training sessions for everyone involved in the foster care system is crucial. Their firsthand experiences offer unique insights into the challenges and needs of those in the system. Advocacy organizations play a pivotal role in ensuring that these voices are heard at every level, enhancing understanding and paving the way for more effective and empathetic policies. This approach ensures that transition-age youth are equipped with the resources and networks needed for fulfilling lives beyond the foster care system. As someone engaged in initiatives like the National Youth Engagement Advisory Council, I've witnessed the essential role of including genuine voices in decision-making processes. These councils play a key role in shaping needs assessments, supporting cross-site youth engagement, and influencing policies to improve the overall advocacy landscape.

I am standing here before you as part of the 5% of foster youth that have graduated from a 4-year college and as a testament to resilience, determination, and the potential of foster youth. While acknowledging my success, I implore this committee to consider the systemic changes needed for the countless others navigating the foster care system. Some suggestions I would give include placing with relatives or in-home support services that can enhance the overall well-being of the youth. While I was in care, I went to school 40 minutes away - I was often waiting for a bus that never came or unable to partake in after-school activities because no one could pick me up. Having the ability to gain a license through a program such as Keys to Independence would have a momentous impact on young people in the foster care system to ensure they have the same access to normalcy as every other young 16 year old. I want to personally thank Representative Davis for recognizing that getting a driver's license is a key milestone of growing up and developing into an independent adult and creating the The Foster Youth and Driving Act.

Many youth preparing to exit the system have not been encouraged to attend a post-secondary educational institution - even being helped with the FAFSA or institutional applications can seem overwhelming and become a major barrier to going to a school or college after high school completion. As you know, once we do get to a college, we may or may not have robust campus support, despite campus coach legislation in many states. I would love to see that legislation funded along with additional qualifiers - To really create a program, to be sure, the person is trained and fully equipped to do the work, they have access to additional funding and support at each institution, every institution has on-campus housing should be required to offer low or no-cost housing to these students that include gap housing and meal plans.

It is worth considering the addition of a federal requirement for a Bill of Rights such as the recently introduced federal Foster Youth Bill of Rights Resolution as it is a historic initiative to inform foster youth nationwide about their rights while in care. Recognizing the significant variations in foster youth rights across states, this resolution highlights ten fundamental rights, including education, participation in activities, and access to health services. With endorsements from various organizations, the resolution aims to raise awareness and establish essential rights to address disparities in foster care. This critical step is essential to empower youth within the system and improve their well-being as they navigate the complexities of the foster care system.

My journey through foster care highlights the formidable challenges faced by youth aging out of the system, and I stand before you as a testament to resilience, determination, and the potential of young people who have experienced the foster care system. Separation from siblings, limited access to necessities, and struggles with the system underscore the urgent need for systemic changes. I implore this committee to consider transformative reforms, such as placing youth with relatives, bolstering in-home support services, and providing widespread access to programs like Keys to Independence for obtaining driver's licenses. My success as a college graduate is a beacon of hope, but there are barriers to post-secondary education that demand attention. I urge you to fund and enhance campus coach legislation, ensuring that every institution offers robust support, including low or no-cost housing and meal plans. My powerful ask is for comprehensive, empathetic policies that empower foster youth, creating a pathway for success beyond the challenges of the foster care system. Let my journey not be an exception, but an inspiration for meaningful change.