

**Testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs,
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce,
and the District of Columbia**

Assessing Foster Care and Family Services in the District of Columbia: Challenges and Solutions

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Good morning, members of Congress and every one here today. My name is Sarah Ocran. I am 18 and have been part of the DC foster care system for the past two years. I also attend Cesar Chavez Public Policy Charter High School in Washington, DC. Today I want to share my story about trying to get placed in a permanent family. I would also like to voice my opinion about permanency and its connection to living in group care.

Permanency is important to me because I want to have a network of people that I can depend on to love and support me for the rest of my life. Being in foster care has taken that away. For two years now, I have desired to live with my Godmother -- who is someone that is loving and supportive of me. The environment she creates is stress-free. My Godmother has a two bedroom apartment and she is willing to move so that I would have my own room. My Godmother is very stable to take care of me.

The reason why I'm not with my Godmother is because my old social worker never called my Godmother back and there was a lot of miss communication going on. So my Godmother became very frustrated with Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). Because I cannot live with my Godmother, I do not want to go off to college. I want to stay local because I'm scared that when I come back from school, I will not have a permanent place to call my home. When my Godmother first started the process to be licensed so I could live with her, I was never told how long it would take for me to transition to her house.

I currently live in a Supervised Independent Living Program (ILP), before then I lived in a group home for about a year. The ILP has both pros and cons. Living in my ILP has made it harder for me to focus on important things, such as college. I want to go out of state to college at North Carolina A&T. But I am afraid that when I return from my winter and summer breaks, I will not have a permanent place to call my home. If I was with my Godmother, I would not have to worry about where I would live when I come back from school breaks. The stress that I have now would be gone, because I can count on her to support and love me the way a teenager should be cared for.



Being in foster care takes away the opportunities I should have as a teenager. At my ILP I have to work, come home, cook dinner, and still do homework for school. I shouldn't have to do all of this. When we have new girls come to our ILP for overnight stays, things in my apartment tend to come up missing. Sometimes I hate the fact that staff are in our apartment because they try to tell us how to live and what to do. But at my ILP I am able to have a room to myself. Having my own room means a lot to me because I am able to have my privacy and some alone time. And I don't have to worry about anyone stealing my things from my room which happens when youth are living in group homes. I also have a good deal of responsibility that will prepare me for the "real world". I like living in my apartment, but I don't have the support I would have if I was living with my Godmother.

I feel that my time in the system is winding down and I'm not able to live my life the way that I want to. I'm growing up too fast. When I went to court on February 2, 2010, everyone said how much progress I had made. The judge, GAL, and social worker said that I exemplify a great level of independence and now that I am 18 years old and technically grown, I don't need parents. They also said how I should be happy to live on my own and that they believed my Godmother showed no interest in me. So then my judge changed my permanency goal from guardianship with my Godmother to APPLA. My input was never considered and after court I went home to consider the change that was made to my goal.

During the past couple months – I've had some time to reflect on my experience in the system and trying to find a permanent home. I contemplated on how my social worker and I never talked once about what my permanency options are and if legal guardianship was something that I really wanted. I waited for a long time to move in with my Godmother. But as time passed by, I felt as though it wasn't going to happen.

I had begun to think what if I move in with my Godmother and we get into a really bad argument and she decides to put me out. I wondered what would happen if she wouldn't give me the money she received for me. I also thought what if she puts me out because I don't fit in to her life style anymore. All of this was going through my mind and I didn't know who to deal with it. I didn't know how to communicate to my Godmother and tell her exactly what I was thinking. I didn't want her to feel like I was wasting her time by making her go through the licensing process and for me to not even end up being there with her. I tried to find out what was going on from my social worker and by writing to CFSA's Office of Youth empowerment – but my social worker could not even provide me with information to let me know why I was not approved to live with my Godmother and why I'm still not there.



I don't communicate with my Godmother that much anymore. Our communication has become some timey because I feel like I put her through all of this to get me and I'm not even there at her house. I also began to think maybe the judge was right and being with my Godmother was never a good place for me to live. I also lost hope because of the procrastination from CFSA. I now think that maybe my ILP is the best place for me because it feels like everyone gave up on me. I have been told that if I do well in my current ILP placement -- I will get my own apartment and I would eventually have a permanent apartment. I was given an option to move into my own apartment last month, but I didn't feel I was ready so I said no because I know I need to stay focused on graduating from high school. Having my own apartment now sounds okay since I was scared about moving with my Godmother.

The time is slowly approaching for me to age out and I do not have stability. I turned 18 in December so I have less than three years until I age out of the DC system. It hurts because I really wanted to be with my Godmother but the system made it hard for me to be there.

I have three recommendations that I would like to share with the Senate that could help foster youth like me.

- 1) Social workers should be more experienced in all aspects of foster care.
- 2) There should be an extension on the age when youth age out because there are youth like myself who are lost and don't know who to turn to for help but the streets.
- 3) Foster youth should have a transition center that will provide foster youth with resources like safety nets, education and permanency that should be funded by money given to CFSA.
- 4) CFSA should develop goals and better practice and organization for their work on permanence. If they were organized and tried harder -- they would be able to get youth like me into permanent homes when they have the chance. I feel like I had the chance last year to make the transition but because CFSA could not get it's act together -- that chance was squandered and now it may not be an option.

Thank you for your time