

Center for Children's Advocacy

University of Connecticut School of Law, 65 Elizabeth Street, Hartford, CT 06105

Testimony Regarding Study of Department of Children and Families Services to Prepare Youth Aging Out of State Care

Program Review and Investigations Committee

October 3, 2013

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a non-profit organization based at the University of Connecticut School of Law. The Center provides holistic legal services for poor children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation and systemic advocacy.

We welcome the chance to submit testimony regarding the Department of Children and Families (DCF) services to prepare youth to successfully age-out of state care. In so doing, we urge the Committee to consider the following three issues: improving discharge and transition planning, allowing kids to remain in care longer, and appointing lawyers to kids whose DCF services are being discontinued.

Discharge/Transition Planning

Based on our research of nationally recognized best practices, we urge the Committee to consider recommending the following:

DCF must begin formal transition/adolescent planning earlier, by at least age 14.

- Use a multidisciplinary approach to address permanency, education, life skills and medical/mental health.
- Standardize life skills assessments and offer them at multiple periodic junctures, such as age 14, 16, 18 and 6 months prior to discharge.
- Institute specialized case planning/supports for unique adolescent populations (ie; pregnant/parenting teens, teens with developmental disabilities).

Ensure adolescent planning includes consideration of educational and post-secondary readiness.

- Use an individualized inquiry depending on age/year in school. See example, Illinois Child and Family Services Plan, found here:
http://www.state.il.us/DCFS/docs/Annual_High_School_Academic_Plan.pdf
- Ensure participation in volunteer or vocational experience every year starting at age 14.

Ensure the Use of a Formalized Process Prior to Discharge.

- Use a "trial discharge" from care of six months duration, during which the youth's case remains open, eliminating the need for re-entry. See NY Regulation 430.12(f)(4)(i)(a).
- Require that any youth discharged from care must have appropriate housing and connection to adults in the community. See NY Regulation 430.12(f)(3)(i)(c).



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Allowing DCF Kids to Remain in Care Longer

Research shows us that youth who “age out” of foster care at 18 face poorer life outcomes than the general population, including lower high school graduation rates, and higher rates of homelessness, incarceration and unplanned pregnancy.

Many child welfare professionals, policy experts and researchers have been advocating the need to extend child welfare support to age 21 with a goal of ensuring that more youth in foster care are able to successfully transition to adulthood. These reform initiatives are based on an increasing body of evidence demonstrating that strategic investments in supporting and educating young people who age out of foster care are essential to the success of our adolescents and their communities.

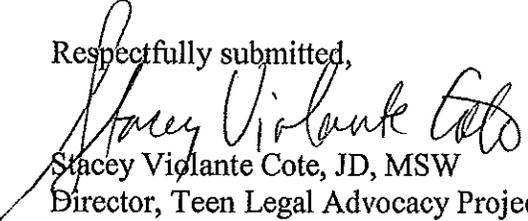
In 2008, in response to these efforts, Congress passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which permits states to draw down federal Title IV-E dollars to support some services for adolescents through age 21. Since 2008, over a dozen states around the country have sought to implement this new federal option. Our state already serves youth through age 21 if they continue to be enrolled in an academic or vocational program, participate in a program approved by the commissioner that is designed to promote or remove barriers to employment, or through a waiver by the commissioner. (Conn. Gen. Stat. §46b-129(j)). Fostering Connections allows states like ours to also serve youth who are entering the work force and medically challenged youth, all while drawing down additional Title IV-E dollars to support the state’s efforts. We urge the Committee to recommend the inclusion of these vulnerable youth as permitted to remain in DCF care.

Appointing Lawyers to Youth with Discontinuation Notices

Kids involved in the child welfare system are automatically appointed lawyers pursuant to Conn. Gen. Stat. § 46b-129a. This practice is universally accepted as an important use of state resources to protect the interests of our most vulnerable children, abused and neglected kids. However, when these same kids are given notice that DCF is planning to reduce, suspend or discontinue their care (also known as a DCF 800 notice, available here: <http://www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=2639&Q=327790>), they do not have a lawyer appointed to them. While they are offered a hearing, with the opportunity to present evidence and witnesses, the notice clearly states that legal counsel is at the youth’s expense. This creates an unfair burden on youth, who have histories of trauma and abuse, to appropriately articulate their defense to the discontinuation. This practice cuts against the prevailing federal policy to keep kids in care as mentioned above.

Thank you for your time and attention to these important treatment and prevention strategies.

Respectfully submitted,


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