

Good afternoon members of the committee. My name is Leanna V and I am writing you in support of the reallocation of funding for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Project that was approved back in 2010. I am currently 21 years old and up until a week ago, I was homeless for the 4<sup>th</sup> time in my life.

I first experienced homelessness when I was just 7 years old with my mother. My mother was disabled and not able to work so we ended up living out of a van for almost a full year. DCF became involved and I was taken into foster care, staying in the care of the state until I was 14 years old. I was eventually reunited with my mother when I was 14. Since she was disabled and not able to work, I had to work to help pay off a lot of the household bills starting when I was 16. I moved out at 18, feeling that I was better off just paying for myself instead of the whole household. But on my own at age 19 I became pregnant, unable to work towards the end and therefore unable to pay my bills. I became homeless again. I tried to avoid going to the local shelter as I knew that there was a lot of drug use there and it didn't seem like a safe environment for a 19 year old girl like me. But pregnant, hungry because I didn't have enough money to feed myself, desperate, and having no resources I eventually went to the local shelter just before I gave birth to my son. After giving birth while staying at the shelter, I started working again and ended up getting an apartment with the father of my son. This had been a relationship that involved domestic violence for quite some time but I had no other options or resources and you're not allowed to stay at the shelter past 3 months. Between the 2 of us, we couldn't afford a very good place and within 4 months of getting our own apartment it was condemned and I became homeless once again, this time with my 4-month-old baby boy. I was still working, so we eventually obtained another apartment with the aid of the town of New London. I was 21 years old, had been consistently employed since age 16 except when I was pregnant, was going to school to finish my GED, and had been homeless 3 times already in my life already. The domestic violence from my son's father continued to escalate. But I couldn't just move out on my own as I couldn't afford it. The DV eventually became too severe for me to handle. So I took my son and went to a local domestic violence shelter, becoming homeless once again. But I got lucky while I was there. A friend of mine knew of an agency called The Connection that had a program that works with kids that had been in foster care in the past and helped them with housing. As luck turned out, I was eligible for this program and just last week they helped me move out of the domestic violence shelter and into my own apartment. Just me and my 1 year old son this time as The Connection is helping me to pay for my rent.

The whole time that I was homeless most recently, I was able to stay in school 5 days a week Monday-Friday from 8:30-12:00 and working 30 hours per week 2<sup>nd</sup> shift. Now that I have a stable roof over my head I have some goals that I am eager to work towards. With my own affordable apartment, a case manager through The Connection to help me navigate living independently, employment, and just 2 months away from graduating with my GED, I'm now optimistic about what my future brings. But I was one of the lucky ones that were eligible for a program like this. I know so many others that don't.

When I was a teenager I had a lot of friends that were not involved in DCF foster care that were getting kicked out of their parents homes. My friends were going from friend to friend or would live out

of their car. A lot of these individuals are now in jail because of the instability in their life. If the Runaway and Homeless Youth program was around back then, maybe all of my friends would be working towards their futures and working towards being successful productive citizens. As I formerly homeless youth, I will share with you that you simply have any good options.

When I was homeless as a youth at 19, my options were limited to going to a shelter where I did not feel safe, doing extremely risky and illegal things for money to support myself, or staying in a domestic violence relationship just so that I could have a roof over my head. Putting money towards resources specifically for runaway and homeless youth would change those options for kids that are out there now.