

Center for *Children's* Advocacy

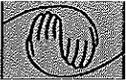
University of Connecticut School of Law, 65 Elizabeth Street, Hartford, CT 06105

H.B. No. 6824 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH 2017, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR AND OTHER PROVISIONS RELATED TO REVENUE

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a statewide private, non-profit legal organization. The Center provides holistic legal representation for poor children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation and systemic advocacy. I am an attorney at the Center and Director of the Teen Legal Advocacy Project, which provides legal services to teens throughout the state. In addition, I am the chair of the Homeless Youth Workgroup of the Reaching Home campaign, the statewide campaign for preventing and ending homelessness. More information about the Reaching Home Campaign and the workgroup can be found here: <http://pschousing.org/runaway-and-homeless-youth-workgroup>.

I write today to request funding to provide legal counsel for youth involuntarily exiting Connecticut's child welfare system. These youth are the most vulnerable of the vulnerable- those who have been abused and neglected and who now are leaving the child welfare system with an unsuccessful outcome. These are young people who will never be returned home and who, on account of their trauma, are having difficulties meeting the expectations of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to continue in care. Their outcomes are negative and costly.

The current budget for the Office of the Chief Public Defender (OCPD) for assigned counsel in child welfare cases is only for representation of children up to the age of eighteen. Because of this, at a time when youth need legal counsel the most- when their entire system of support is at stake- they do not have it. We respectfully request that Conn. Gen. Stat. §51-296 (c) be amended to provide legal representation at:



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"...any administrative or court proceeding in which a youth eighteen or over who will be, or has been, released from the care and custody of the Department of Children and Families as a result of a denial, suspension or termination of benefits requested by the Department of Children and Families, provided the youth consents to the representation..."

In 2014, 161 youth were terminated from DCF care after age eighteen. Only 20% of these youth had achieved the goal of completing school, working full time or enlisting in the military.¹ The financial burden to provide legal counsel to these youth is minimal. Additionally, OCPD already has the structure to provide these lawyers and there are a group of attorneys trained and ready to represent youth.

¹ DCF discharge data as of January 2015.

The 2013 study, "Invisible No More: Creating opportunities for youth who are homeless," conducted by The Consultation Center at Yale University², documented the vulnerability of these youth. The study interviewed 98 homeless youth as well as key state and private stakeholders and found:

- Approximately ½ of the young people reported their family had contact with DCF;
- Of those, 69.2% had been removed from their home by DCF;
- More than 10% were raised by DCF or foster parents;
- Several youth reported that they had traded sex for money (7.1%), a place to stay (8.2%); and drugs or alcohol (4.1%);
- 23.5% of the youth first experienced sexual intercourse at age 12 or under;
- 32% dropped out of school;
- 66% were unemployed and 26% were employed part-time; and
- ¼ of the young people reported considering suicide over the last year.

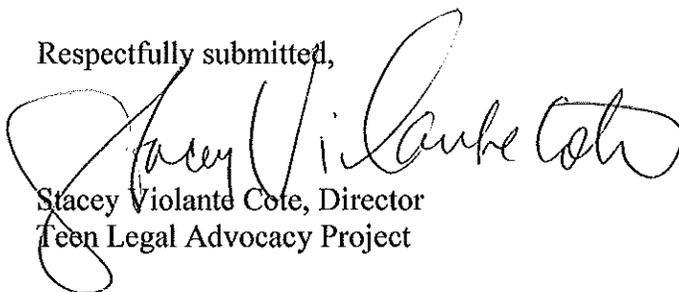
These numbers show that youth who are experiencing homelessness in Connecticut have contact with DCF, in some cases have been raised by DCF, and they are at great risk. One critical recommendation made by the Study is the need to address the special challenges that young people exiting the child welfare system experience.³ Providing legal counsel for young people involuntarily exiting DCF care will do this.

The data is echoed in the voices of the homeless youth I speak with. One such young man is "Michael." I met him last week at a community agency in Hartford. He is a nineteen year old high school student who left DCF care at age eighteen unprepared for living on his own. Because he had nowhere to go, he reverted back to living with his neglectful father who stole from him. He ended up getting evicted and was couch surfing with friends. He even slept outside in this bitter cold weather. He just kept saying, "I never knew how to do these things on my own."

We urge you to fund this critical need.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,



Stacey Violante Cote, Director
Teen Legal Advocacy Project

² Gordon, D, Hunter, B. (2013). "Invisible No More: Creating opportunities for youth who are homeless." Available at: <http://www.psychousing.org/files/InvisibleNoMoreReport.pdf>.

³ Id. at 39, 46-47