

Artemis Fontaine

Testimony Requesting Bill no 5553 be Amended to Help Homeless Students

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Hello, my name is Artemis Fontaine. I'm 20 years old, and I am one of the 3000 youth accounted for in the 2015 Youth Count for homeless and unstably housed youth. As a person struggling with mental illness, and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I felt hopeless and as if everything in my world had turned against me. I reached out to every resource I could find here in Connecticut and bounced from couch to couch to couch, sometimes sleeping in my car in the middle of winter. I feared for my life, and felt I was not safe even from myself. It has been one year and three months since I attempted suicide - a solution to what I had thought an impossible problem.

It was after surviving this attempt on my life that I was introduced to the staff at the Institute of Living Young Adult Services. I was in the lowest point in my life and they bent over backwards to make sure I was okay. They eventually helped me contact The Connection Inc. Their START Program for 18-24 year olds suffering from homelessness and unstable housing placed me in a crisis apartment in January of 2015. It was a place to come home to, a door with a lock, a room with a bed, and precious heat.

These are things I would have done anything for - and this was a gift. They gave me a case worker to help me get food stamps, their financial department helped me start paying off my bills, and they helped me look for my own apartment which they would pay for until I got on my feet again. All they asked of me was the effort to get back on my feet and become independent. Studies demonstrate that 80% of single adults and 90% of families do not return to homelessness three years after rapid re-housing assistance like I was given.

I went out and made connections, networked, found jobs, and have been paying the majority of my bills on my own since then, and still have the better part of a year left of aid. They paid for me to go take an A+ course for IT and Networking so I could have a career, so I could stay independent and contribute to society without worrying about falling back into the hole I had found myself in. Without this aid it's very likely I would be on the streets still, or worse. This investment they made in me and my future has led me to becoming a research intern at the Institute for Community Research - studying youth homelessness and identifying solutions to help others like me. I'm also a phone operator for a crisis hotline, and an advocate for people who can't climb out of their holes unless given a helping hand.- my plea to you is that children in schools already dealing with enough stress are given the attention, the resources and the connections they need to thrive. Our schools need to do a better job of identifying students who are experiencing homelessness. By intervening in schools, we can identify these students and provide support and refer them to programs to help them. These students are often unaware of their rights and often stop attending school. By catching these problems before students stop attending, we can reduce absenteeism & drop out. With so many youths having trouble, we have to look at the root of the problem, and catch it early. If we identify the kids who need help, we can save them the difficulties that I and my friends have suffered.