Introductions: Bill Motsavage

On behalf of the Independent Living Youth Advisory Board, I would like to thank the Committee for giving us the opportunity to speak to you today.

For the past fifteen years, I have worked with young people aging out of the child welfare system as well as homeless teens. I have also had the privilege of facilitating the Pennsylvania Independent Living Youth Advisory Board. The mission of the board is to educate and advocate for positive change in the substitute care system. The board is comprised of current and former substitute care youth from across the Commonwealth.

Today, you will hear from the true experts on the foster care system: three youth with a combined 27 years in care. In particular the youth will share their experiences, many of which are related to the proposed bill.

Adrienne Stinson:

My name is Adrienne Stinson and I am from Philadelphia, PA. I am 20 years old and I am currently in my last semester at the Community College of Philadelphia. I have been involved in the dependency system since I was six years old. I have been in about
ten different places that I can think of including group homes and one placement in North Carolina. I became involved with the Youth Advisory Board through the Achieving Independence Center in Philadelphia. The following testimony is only a brief glimpse into the challenges I have faced during my life in foster care.

I have three points I would like to talk about today: age appropriate freedoms, having properly trained caretakers, and being placed with siblings when possible or at least having sibling visits on a regular basis.

1. Age Appropriate Freedoms: I think as a child I should have had certain rules and as normal a life as possible given the circumstances of being in dependent care. However, I did not lead a normal life. I was not able to talk with my foster parents about personal issues or ask questions. My foster parents did not teach me things that any ten or eleven year old should know. They did not teach me or my brothers about personal hygiene and normal changes that happen during puberty. No one bought me deodorant or soap. I did not receive allowance, and could not buy my own products. I had to watch my foster mother buy clothes and shoes for her children, and I received nothing. Even though I did odd jobs like babysitting, I was never paid anything.

Think of the everyday things parents teach their kids through positive reinforcement. Today, I give my son a dollar when he cleans up his room or makes his bed. He is only four, but this helps him to learn responsibility. In my case, there was rarely any structure for learning through positive reinforcement. I was abused in my foster homes and had negative reinforcement. I did not have the opportunity to learn like other kids my age. The rules in foster care prevented me from doing the things other kids could do. I was not allowed to attend sleepovers since my friends did not go through
background checks and home inspections. I was not allowed to go to movies. I was not given an allowance. Although I was not considered responsible enough to go out with friends, I was left with all of my foster parent’s children on a regular basis, and even overnight when I was only 13-14 years old.

Age appropriate freedoms would have helped me by not only preparing me for life as an adult but also helped me feel like a regular kid and to fit in. When you move us much as I did, it is hard enough to figure out who you are and where you fit in without being treated so differently.

2. My second point is the need to have caretakers who are well trained. When I lived with a foster family in Philadelphia for two to three years, my foster mother would leave every day. She had a one year old and two daughters ages 6 and 8, and at the time three of my five brothers lived with me. They were around the same age as her daughters. She would pick up her two kids and take them to daycare and private school, and I would take my three brothers to the local school. In the afternoon, she would drop her kids off, and I would return from school with my brothers, when I went to school, and I would watch all six kids until the next morning when she came home. She basically lived with her boyfriend who lived elsewhere. This meant that I had to make dinner and get everybody ready for bed. This happened every day. I lived there for about two or three years. One day, while she was gone, her older daughter burned me with a large curling iron. I told my foster mother, and she refused to take me to the doctor. My teacher saw the burn and encouraged me to tell what actually happened. I found out the burn was 2nd and 3rd degree, once I was taken to the hospital. Me and my brothers were finally moved
from this foster home after this happened. I had to fight to get my brothers moved with me.

3. Sibling Visitation: It is important for families to be able to see each other. I was separated from one of my brothers for twelve years. At times, I lived with some of my brothers, but I did not see my sister from ages six to 14. When I was 13, I found out that I had an eight year old brother. My bond with my siblings is strong, but we missed out on many of the experiences that most siblings have while they’re growing up.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Constance Krebs:

Good afternoon, thank you for inviting me and the members of the youth advisory board to this meeting. We appreciate being given the opportunity to share our personal views, opinions, and experiences.

My name is Constance Krebs. I am 21 years old and was in and out of placement for six years before aging out at eighteen. Currently, I am pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Hotel Management at The Restaurant School in West Philadelphia. Next year, I will be going to Immaculata University to get my master’s degree in International Business. Someday, I hope to be a human resources manager.

I will comment on two areas today.

1. The first issue is related to aging out of the system. In many cases, youth are forced to leave the system at 18 or when they graduate high school. Others choose to leave because they are so frustrated with not being able to do things that kids who live at home can. Many youth go through a similar experience to mine, and receive little to know help planning for what happens when you leave the system.
On June 13th 2002, I turned eighteen and “aged out” of the dependency system.

That day was the single most terrifying day of my life. I sat in my foster home in a room that had been mine for the past three years, surrounded by boxes of my stuff, and I cried. My future was very uncertain that day. I had very little discharge planning and I wasn’t aware of all of my options. In fact, I went back to my family and the situation that I was in substitute care to get away from. It was as if nothing had changed. Not long after moving back into my mom’s house, she kicked me out and I moved in with friends. Every time she threw me out, she would tell me to come back a few weeks later. Things would be good for a short while and then the chaos would start all over again. Living with friends was fun at first, but after awhile, I got tired of moving from place to place. I couldn’t enroll in college or hold a steady job. I had no stability. It wasn’t until over a year later, when I was almost twenty years old, that I met Jodi Doyle, my Independent Living caseworker from Tabor. She helped me with college applications and essays, financial aid, budgeting, and other independent living skills. If before leaving foster care, I had learned some of these things and had a solid support system, then I would have made a better transition into the adult world. This is why I feel appropriate discharge planning and support is so important.

2. My second area of comment is on age appropriate freedom. One of the things that would have helped me to better prepare for the adult world is age appropriate freedom. If a teenager is sheltered and not given room to make some of their own decisions, they will be overwhelmed once they “age out” and enter the real world. Part of growing up is learning from your mistakes.
The night of my senior prom, I was given a ten o’clock curfew. The prom didn’t end until 11:30 pm. I wasn’t going to the shore with all of my friends afterwards, like other kids, but I at least wanted to stay until the prom was over. That is the biggest night in any teen’s life. It’s also a night that you can never get back. My friends all gave me a hard time about my having an early bedtime and once again, I was a foster kid who didn’t quite fit in.

It is also important to encourage a good work ethic. My foster parents made me quit my job because I was grounded for being on the phone too much with my boyfriend. Imagine that, a teenage girl who talked on the phone too much. A job should not be considered a privilege that can be taken away as punishment. A job is necessary for survival. As a result of losing my job, I ended up having a gap in my employment on my resume and losing much needed income. You have to work, so you can save your money and learn money management. Teenagers have a very tough time. While they should be preparing for some of the responsibilities of being an adult, they also need to enjoy the advantages of their youth.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my experiences.

Duoc Quach:

I would like to thank the Committee for inviting us to participate in this hearing. These are very important issues for us as youth in care. We appreciate the Committee’s willingness to hear our stories and to make efforts to improve the system.

My name is Duoc Quach. I am 20 years old. I have been in the system for six years. I am currently in a Supervised Independent Living Placement and will be discharged in February 2006 when I turn 21. Hopefully I could make a positive impact on the foster care system before I leave care in appreciation for what the
system has given me. I am currently attending Community College of Philadelphia, and am in my second year. I hope to transfer to Drexel or Temple to get my bachelors in Computer Science. I am here today and I joined the YAB because I want to make the system better for the kids that come after me. Today, I will focus on three issues related to my experiences in care.

1. **Stability in placement and in school is very important.** Since I was in care I have been in four placements. Many kids who have been in the system all their lives have been in 20 or more placements and schools. It has been very frustrating and confusing. I always had to leave friends and people that I cared about. It makes you feel lonely and depressed. Each time they moved me to a different placement, it was more restrictive although I had not gotten into any trouble and I was not mentally challenged or crazy.

   Too many kids today who have been in the system have dropped out because they had to move so much and change placement and schools. It makes it more difficult to finish school when you always have to start over or lose school credit when you move. Each time I went to another placement, I had to change schools. It took me longer to graduate then it should have because of the movement. My records were always lost, and I did not get credit for work I had done. It always took a long time to enroll at school and I missed a lot of days because of it. Therefore, it seems like the system does not care about our education.

   Then when I am enrolled into a new school I had trouble with school trips because of the label that is in my record from different placements. If records are not an issue then having to get approval from DHS is a hassle because of time delays or money issues. Therefore, youth miss out on things that they should not have to because of all the hassle. Just think about how many youth including myself felt when we have to stay in school while other kids were out on a trip. We felt left out, depressed, lonely and unwanted. I believe this is why many youth in care such as myself become depressed.

2. **Being Truthful with Youth about their Choices is my second point.**
My second placement was in Tennessee. I was not told the truth about where I was going. I was told I was going to a group home where I could attend public school, get a job, and be with kids who are not in placement. What shocked me was that they described this group home like it was so perfect and comfortable. I felt like I was going to Disneyland. When I got to Tennessee however, I was surprised and shocked when I saw two big escorts who had handcuffs and pepper spray. I felt like my case worker had betrayed me, and I felt like my hope and trust had been crushed. Then they took me to a lock down facility in the middle of nowhere. I had to wear a yellow suit. I had to wear shoes with no laces. I felt like I was in jail even though I had not committed any crime.

While I was in Tennessee for many months, I was told by my placement therapists that I have depression and had anger management issues. I kept telling all of them that this is not true, so they labeled me a youth in denial. Then one day, my placement roommate told me something that was shocking and surprising. He told me that if I were to say what ever the therapist wanted to hear then she or he will let me leave in a month or two. So I did and two months later, they sent me back to Philadelphia. It is funny how things work out sometimes. By falsely "admitting" that I had anger management problems and depression I was able to leave the placement but I had to pay the price of having those labels in my records which could effect me in the long run by interfering with getting a job or having a career in law.

3. **Placement/Foster parents that reflect a child’s culture, or our willing to learn about it, should be recruited.**

I came to Philadelphia from Thailand. When I was placed in foster care with a Caucasian family, it was a whole new environment. For example, I was used to eating rice and noodles and they ate potatoes and macaroni and cheese. I use chopsticks and they used forks. They did not really make an effort to help me feel comfortable or learn about my culture. People stared at me and made me feel uncomfortable because I am Asian and the family was white. Foster parents should at least take some time to learn about the culture of their foster child. When they don’t make the effort to learn about your culture, it makes you feel like they don’t care.
Thank you for the opportunity to testify.