

Testimony Supporting S.B. 813: An Act Concerning Youth Aging Out of Department of
Children and Families Custody

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Committee on Children

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Senator Suzio, Senator Moore, Representative Urban, Representative Zupkus, and
distinguished members of the Committee on Children,

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based child advocacy organization working to ensure that all Connecticut children have an equitable opportunity to achieve their full potential. **We submit this testimony in support of Senate Bill 813, “An Act Concerning Youth Aging Out of Department of Children and Families Custody.”**

We believe that this bill represents an opportunity to significantly prevent the incidence of homelessness and other related adverse outcomes for one of our most vulnerable populations – youth aging out of foster care. Since 2011, Connecticut has been engaged in a nationally recognized endeavor to end homelessness. It is a worthy goal: for one Connecticut resident to be homeless for a year costs an average of \$33,000 in services,¹ and has lasting consequences for the individual’s safety, employability, and physical and mental health.² However, homelessness requires both treatment and prevention. **Preventing homelessness before it occurs is more affordable, effective, and humane than intervening after an individual has already become homeless.** Moreover, prevention is especially important during the pivotal stage of early adulthood: without a safe place to live, a young person is at serious risk of further harm and faces great barriers to establishing a stable adulthood.

Youth who age out of foster care – those who turn 18 while still in foster care, without a legal family – are some of our most state’s vulnerable young people.

- **By age 19, 20% of Connecticut youth who aged out of care were either currently homeless or had been homeless in the last two years. By age 21, that number reached 29%.³**
- Although the number of children in Connecticut foster care is small, (only about 4,000 at any given time),⁴ it is estimated that **one-third of Connecticut’s homeless youth under 25 (about 1,000 per year) are or were DCF-involved.⁵**

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) has made great improvements in keeping families intact and in placing children with relatives, but in many cases DCF is unable to achieve reunification, adoption, or a transfer of guardianship. When this happens, children ultimately “age out” of state care as legal adults without the guidance or financial supports that families provide. As statutory parent, the state has a particular legal and moral obligation to these children. These youth

are often alone with no one to turn to in the event of a crisis and face high risk of homelessness, exploitation, early pregnancy, and poverty. The Department of Children and Families has an obligation to give youth adequate time and support in which to find a safe, stable place to live.

These provisions are particularly important given that all available data indicates that on the very day that they leave DCF care, many youth are already entering unstable housing. Of 276 youth who aged out in Fiscal Year 2016,

- 3% already knew they would be homeless or in a shelter.
- 17% would be living with a partner or friends – often couch-surfing without a lease.
- 8% planned to live with former foster families, usually with no written agreement or guarantee that they could continue living there. In many cases, if something went wrong, these youth would soon be homeless.
- For 3% of youth, DCF had no information about where they would be living.⁶

Youth exiting from DCF care are not prepared to succeed in other ways as well.

- 23% of discharges were due to failure to meet DCF expectations – in other words, these youth were unable to succeed in secondary or post-secondary education, job training programs, or other requirements.
- 21% of all foster youth who aged out last year left without a high school diploma or GED.
- 57% left without a job.
- 13% were already pregnant or parenting.
- Only 11% had achieved an associate's or bachelor's degree.

Under current policy, youth can become homeless the day they leave DCF care. Although DCF helps youth attempt to find a stable place to live after support is withdrawn, the Department is currently permitted to allow youth to discharge into unsafe or unstable situations. Moreover, only youth who complete a post-secondary education program are entitled to a 90-day transition period before DCF support is terminated. Other youth (such as those who fail to complete their educational program) may receive as little as 10 days notice that they will lose state support and be entirely on their own. That leaves insufficient time to ensure secure housing, sufficient income, and any needed services.

Moreover, after youth leave care, the state provides no aftercare. If a youth experiences a crisis, like an eviction, even one day after being discharged, petitioning to re-enter care is the only way by which they can gain any support from the Department that previously served as their parent.

This bill represents a critical step to help youth avoid homelessness and achieve stable lives after leaving care. This bill has three main provisions. 1.) It requires that DCF make reasonable efforts to ensure that some youth have a stable residence in which they can remain for at least twelve months after leaving care. 2.) It requires that DCF provide case management for 45 days and intervene in the event that a youth is at risk of homelessness. 3.) It states that all youth must receive at least 90 days notice before their services are terminated.

All available data indicates the critical need for prevention services to help youth secure stable housing. In this era of difficult fiscal choices, we believe these provisions are worth their relatively small cost, as **preventing homelessness is far less costly than treating its symptoms.** Moreover, helping young people achieve the stability they need in order to establish a successful

adulthood has valuable long-term benefits for our state's economy. Now more than ever it is important to invest in young people's stability and productivity to help them become an asset to our state – especially for youth who have grown up in the state's care.

Thank you again for this opportunity to submit testimony regarding Senate Bill 813.

I can be reached with any questions at nupdegrove@ctvoices.org or (203)498-4240.

Thank you,

Nicole Updegrove

Connecticut Voices for Children

¹ Figure provided in a presentation by Kathryn Parr, University of Connecticut School of Social Work, at an April 2016 Forum, *The Next Frontier: Ending Family Homelessness*. These findings came from a yet unpublished study by the University of Connecticut on the costs of homelessness. The presentation is available at http://www.pschousing.org/files/CECHI_4_21_16-2final.pdf.

² National Network for Youth. "Consequences of Youth Homelessness." https://www.nn4youth.org/wp-content/uploads/IssueBrief_Youth_Homelessness.pdf.

³ Data from CT Voices analysis of Connecticut data from the National Youth in Transition Database. These youth are from a cohort of foster children who turned 17 in 2011, with follow-up interviews at age 19 and 21. CT Voices will be publishing a report on this data this spring.

⁴ Department of Children and Families. "Number of Children in Placement." Updated August 2016. <https://data.ct.gov/Health-and-Human-Services/DCF-Children-in-Placement-Annual-Point-in-Time-Tre/cvuc-j526>.

⁵ Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness. "Connecticut Counts: 2015 Report on Homelessness in Connecticut." May 2015. <http://cceh.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CT-Counts-v2-1.pdf>.

⁶ Updegrove, Nicole and Lauren Ruth, PhD. "The Time to Grow: Meeting the Needs of All Youth Aging out of Foster Care." December 15 2016. www.ctvoices.org/timetogrow.