

**Testimony Supporting
H.B. 6403: An Act Concerning a Children in Care Bill of Rights and Expectations
and the Sibling Bill of Rights**

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Committee on Children
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Senator Abrams, Representative Linehan, Senator Kelly, Representative Green, and esteemed members of the Committee on Children:

My name is Jessica Nelson and I am testifying today 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. **Thank you for providing me the opportunity to voice our support of H.B. 6403: An Act Concerning a Children in Care Bill of Rights and Expectations and the Sibling Bill of Rights.**

For all children, adolescence is a time of personal growth and self-exploration. Teenagers are driven to explore their personal identity in their schools and communities through extra-curricular activities, religious organizations, relationships with friends, and more.¹ Safe environments and supportive role models and guardians are crucial during this time to help youth pursue prosocial pathways while exploring some of life's big, daunting questions. For teenagers and young adults in care, the process of identity development and self-exploration can be impacted in unique ways. For example, a teen who has to switch schools due to a placement change may find it difficult to maintain old relationships, build new ones, and stay connected to activities they feel are important to who they are.

On any given day, there are roughly 4,000 children in Connecticut's foster care system.² Around one-third of these youth are over the age of 14.³ Fifty-nine percent of these adolescent youth have experienced three or more placement changes in their most recent time in the foster care system.⁴ With each of these changes, youth are potentially exposed to a new family, community, and school, and may have to learn to navigate the cultural practices different from their own, join new extracurricular activities, and build new relationships with peers and mentors. Multiple placement changes and shifting between different environments can impact an adolescent's sense of belonging and thus affect how they view themselves.⁵

In the fall and winter of 2018, Connecticut Voices for Children met with teenagers and young adults in the care of the Department of Children and Families through the state's Youth Advisory Boards and conducted informal focus groups and surveys. These youth spoke about the need for support and guidance as they cultivated their personal identities and learned to express themselves.⁶

Multiple youth discussed their desire to feel supported and safe as they came to understand and express their sexual orientation or gender identity. One youth spoke about not being able to wear clothing that matched their gender identity, and the resulting feeling that their foster parents were trying to change an integral part of who they were. Another teen described the support she received in a foster home after divulging her sexual orientation, highlighting the importance of feeling safe and comfortable to be herself.⁷ Although DCF does not collect sexual orientation or gender identity information, national research has confirmed that youth who identify as LGBTQ+ are disproportionately represented in the foster care system;

the percentage of LGBTQ+ youth in the foster system is twice as high as in the general population.⁸ Protecting and supporting these youth, as they come to understand their own identity in relation to gender and sexual orientation is important to promote prosocial behavior and mitigate potential mental health issues.⁹

Youth also discussed the need for support in developing and maintaining their cultural, racial, and ethnic identities. One youth described the different experiences he had being placed in a family that shared the same culture, religion, and ethnic background as him compared one that had a different cultural and religious background. In the family with a similar background, he felt comfortable and understood. Other youth described requests to foster families related to their cultural and ethnic backgrounds such as having proper haircare products and being able to eat foods they were familiar with. Additionally, youth described the difficulty of adapting to new neighborhoods where the culture was significantly different from the one(s) they had previously lived in.¹⁰ Connecting with people who shared their cultural and ethnic backgrounds allowed these youth to maintain their cultural practices while feeling understood and accepted. Since only 37% of Latino youth and 65% of Black youth in Connecticut are matched with a foster home where at least one parent shares their racial background, connecting youth to members of their racial and ethnic communities is an important step in reducing feelings of alienation and embracing youths' cultural identity.¹¹

Our discussions with youth highlighted the importance of being in touch with their communities and being supported by their caregivers as they explored and expressed their identities.¹² We believe H.B. 6403 will address these concerns of Connecticut's youth in care. Specifically, the provisions to “develop and maintain the child's own values, hopes, goals, religion, spirituality and identity, including, but not limited to, sexual and gender identity, in a safe and caring environment;” to have “visitation or ongoing contact with the child's parents, siblings, extended family and friends;” and to “be placed in a safe environment in the child's home community and preplacement visits to such placement when possible” directly address the concerns of many youth we spoke to. Codifying these rights in the form of the Children in Care Bill of Rights and Expectations will allow youth to engage in the processes of healthy identity development and self-exploration through the maintenance of relationships to their communities, friends, and family and the rights afforded to them in developing their spiritual, sexual, and gender identity, among others.

We commend the committee for integrating the language of the current Department of Child and Families Adolescents in Care Bill of Rights, a document created with input from youth in care. The voices of youth who have experienced DCF care are important in the process of creating policies and practices that best address the issues these youth face. The inclusion of the Adolescents in Care Bill of Rights provides this invaluable insight. Furthermore, the provision to inform youth of the Sibling Bill of Rights, the Office of the Ombudsman, and the Office of the Child Advocate will aid youth in care in advocating for themselves if they are being denied the rights afforded to them. We recommend that the Committee add language requiring caseworkers to provide youth with the full Children in Care Bill of Rights and Expectations as well as the Sibling Bill of Rights to further arm them with the information needed to defend their rights.

For these reasons, we support H.B. 6403, and hope the Committee will include the Children in Care Bill of Rights and Expectations to the annual requirement for caseworkers defined in Section 2 Part D. Thank you for the opportunity to share this testimony. I can be reached with any questions at jnelson@ctvoices.org or at 203-498-4240.

¹ Sokol, J.T. (2009). Identity development throughout the lifetime: An examination of Eriksonian theory. *Graduate Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 1(2), 139-148.

² Chronicle of Social Change. (2018). Who cares: A national count of foster homes and families. Connecticut state profile. Retrieved from: <https://www.fostercarecapacity.com/states/connecticut>

³ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2018). Fostering youth transitions: Using data to drive policy and practice decisions – 2018 Connecticut Profile. Retrieved from:

<https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/connecticutfosteringyouthtransitions-2018.pdf>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Colaner, C.W. (2014). Measuring adoptive identity: Validation of the adoptive identity work scale. *Adoption Quarterly*, 17(2), 134-157. (135)

⁶ Luczak, S., Nelson, J., & Ruth, L. (2018). Who I Am, Where I Belong, and Where I'm Going: Promoting Positive Identity Development for Youth in Connecticut Foster Care. Connecticut Voices for Children. Retrieved from: www.ctvoices.org/youthatcapitol8

⁷ Notes from discussions with youth and Youth at the Capitol Day Speakers.

⁸ Human Rights Campaign. (n.d.) LGBTQ youth in the foster care system. Retrieved from <https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/HRC-YouthFosterCare-IssueBrief-FINAL.pdf>

⁹ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2013). Supporting your LGBTQ youth: A guide for foster parents. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. Retrieved from: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/LGBTQyouth.pdf>

¹⁰ Notes from discussions with youth and Youth at the Capitol Day Speakers.

¹¹ Luczak, S., Nelson, J., & Ruth, L. (2018). Who I Am, Where I Belong, and Where I'm Going: Promoting Positive Identity Development for Youth in Connecticut Foster Care. Connecticut Voices for Children. Retrieved from: www.ctvoices.org/youthatcapitol8

¹² Ibid.