

Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Health and Human Services

July 14, 2016

Bill 21-603

Foster Parent Statements of Rights and Responsibilities Amendment Act of 2016

Testimony of Donna Flenory
DC foster parent

Good morning, Chairperson Alexander and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. I am Donna Flenory, a CFSA DC foster parent. I became a foster parent for CFSA in the last few years after the agency I was fostering for lost their contract with CFSA. I specialize in teens, and often receive youth into my home who only have a very short time before they will emancipate out of the system at age 21. I am also a Youth Mental Health First Aide trainer certified by the Department of Behavioral Health as well as a parent educator and Shared Parenting trainer through the Foster & Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center.

I would like to support the proposed Bill 21-603 that requires the District to establish a Statements of Rights and Responsibilities for foster parents and to guarantee that each foster parent will be given this document. Thank you, Chairperson Alexander, for holding this hearing and giving the District's foster parents this opportunity.

As a foster parent of teens, I think this bill would be very helpful to me. One of the things I struggle with is having youth come to my home with living experiences equal to being an adult, yet in terms of maturation, they cannot handle adult responsibilities. This is often not compatible with "family living." When I became a foster parent I had thought that I would have the "right" to run my home as I see best, as long as I stayed inside basic guidelines. However, in reality that is not so. I have to govern myself according to broad and general mandates, which often don't take into consideration the individual challenges of that child. Additionally, how I am instructed to manage funds with regards to the youth is written one way and interrupted another depending on the situation and the worker and the messages I receive are inconsistent. For example, there is an allowance policy that all foster parents are supposed to follow. I have spoken out loudly about the fact that I do not feel I should be giving allowances to those youth who are not going to school or work or doing anything productive, or to those youth who are spending their allowances on drugs or alcohol. If I were allowed to parent the way I believe in, an allowance would be a reward, not an entitlement. However, the youth come into my home very aware of the allowance as their right, and depending on my worker I have been told that "yes I can withhold allowance if I think it is best"; or "no I cannot withhold allowance for any reason"; or "yes the allowance can relate to house chores"; or "no, the allowance cannot relate to house chores". I can attempt to withhold allowance and put it in account for the youth so that I can assist them with managing it, however when the youth cries fowl

loud enough I am told they have a right to their funds. When the money is gone I now have the responsibility to meet the needs for which the misspent funds were allocated. The youth come clearly knowing their rights, and I as the adult often end up acting as an ATM, grocery store, and innkeeper. I to this day cannot articulate my rights.

We are also told that we can't force youth to do anything, that they have rights to refuse taking their medication; rights to refuse going to therapy; rights to refuse to go to school or work; rights to stay in my house every day doing nothing even if I go out to work. Then, at 21 we cut them loose and all the things we allowed them to "not do" have messed them up for their future. So many of our youth end up homeless or in trouble, and I believe that the system that does not allow us to parent in a sensible manner is largely responsible. In my heart, I believe that children should have rights; however the primary right should be to have loving adults who will be able to look out for their best interest in the present and future. While I believe in "try, fail, adjust, and try again", I refuse to be a part of setting them up for failure. I am told I really don't have any rights except to try to convince my youth of what I believe is best for them. When youth leave my home, they often come back when they are in need. After they get a few years in the world, they admit they would have been better off if they did go to therapy, take their medications, or get other help they needed, but by then they are on their own.

I believe that convening the process to consolidate rights and responsibilities of foster parents will make us clarify just what those rights are, especially for those of us who parent teens who don't have long time to waste before the system cuts them off.

Another way I think this bill would help is to clarify the process for raising complaints. I generally have good relationship with my workers, and I am not afraid to confront issues. So although this has not impacted me personally, I have spoken with many foster parents who are terrified to elevate issues up their chain of command for fear of repercussions. When I encourage these parents to speak to the Ombudsman at CFSA, they often are not aware of this option. I find myself questioning why they didn't know about the office before they spoke with me. I think this bill would be very helpful in clarifying this process to all parents.

Thank you, Chairperson Alexander, for the chance to testify today.