

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF S.B. 283

AN ACT EXTENDING THE AGE OF ELIGIBILITY FOR LEGAL REPRESENTATION PROVIDED BY THE
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Joint Committee on Children

March 3, 2020

Dear Chairs, Vice Chairs, and Honorable Committee on Children Members:

My name is Alexis. I'm 26 years old, from a small town in Connecticut. I am here to represent Senate Bill 283, as it is very important to me.

Growing up, at the age of 2, I was placed into foster care. My drug addicted parents couldn't take care of my younger brother, and I was placed in homes of family members. At the age of 12, I lost my mother to her drug overdose. At that time, I was placed back into the custody of my father, as he eventually got sober. However, since the time he got out of prison, the sobriety didn't stick around long enough. At the age of 16, I was placed back into foster care. With the help of my foster mom, I was able to maintain school, sports, band, etc. and was able to graduate high school with honors! After graduating high school, I continued to do voluntary services through DCF, until the age of 23!

With DCF's support services, I was able to have my own apartment, focus on college, and earn degrees in Early Childhood Education and Psychology. After graduating, my case closed with DCF. Little did I know, I was going to be on my own and enter adulthood. I was very lucky to have the guidance of my foster mother that whole time – without her, I would not have had someone consistent to advocate for me. Last year, I found out I was pregnant.

These happiest of moments in my life were shattered when I came to find out that my DCF insurance benefits were no longer activated. I was stunned by this. When I was leaving DCF care, no one had advised me that my insurance coverage through DCF would end at age 26. Because of all the stress this caused, and the lack of prenatal care I could get as a result, my daughter was born 7 weeks early, just about 7 weeks ago. Due to her health needs, and no longer having insurance, we weren't sure if my daughter was going to make it, or if she would be able to come home. I wish I had someone when I was in voluntary DCF care to make sure this was all explained to me, and to help me fill out the paperwork, to make sure I was prepared for when the coverage would end.

My social worker was very good at a lot of things, but was never very helpful in guiding me with all the paperwork. It is a concern of mine that other teenagers like myself will face this same issue, and won't

have been advised about how to file for health insurance, let alone the proper phone calls to make. I urge you to help pass this bill, and help other teenagers who are aging out of care get the ongoing legal support that they need, as some of us aren't as lucky. Even with a supportive foster mom, and a helpful social worker, I am an example of how you can still fall through the cracks from a lack of advocacy. It wasn't until I found the Center for Children's Advocacy at the hospital, after my daughter was born, that I got help fighting for insurance for my daughter and I. Thank you, for listening to my testimony.

Alexis, age 26 Clinton, CT

March 3, 2020

I strongly agree with supporting the Bill for young adults who voluntarily remain in the DCF system (over age 18) to be able to keep their attorney after age 18.

My name is Tatiana Beckford and I am 19. I have been in the DCF system since age 14. I met my attorney, Stacey Violante Cote, at that age. She has been there with me through every transitional program I've ever been to, and she has remained with me. Even though I am over 18 now and no longer get a lawyer, she has stayed with me voluntarily through the Center for Children's Advocacy. She helped me with a lot of support that I needed and helped me to find my voice within myself. I am so thankful that my attorney came into my life and she still continues to be in my life. As young adults, after becoming 18, the question is what should I do now? That's a question that, in my opinion, we all ask ourselves. Even when we're still with DCF voluntarily. Young adults are more connected to their attorney because they know their attorney is there for them to listen, to help and to advocate for their needs. In my opinion, my attorney is my number one supporter. We all deserve to have our attorney past the age of 18. Our voice and our thoughts matter. Our attorney has played a big part in our life. So, I ask you to consider allowing us to keep our attorney.

March 3, 2020

To the Committee on Children:

Hello, my name is Kai Greene, and I am a student at Manchester High School. I am 19 years old. I am here today to support Senate Bill 283 to ensure older youth in DCF have access to an attorney. When I was 13, my brothers and I were placed in DCF care. I didn't have much support from the system, and was placed in homes that I didn't feel comfortable in. I started to run away and realized I only had myself to

rely on. Although my experience made me stronger in some ways, you don't expect a child to advocate for themselves. I needed the support of an adult to help navigate the system to help me understand.

In the last few years, I have had issues with attendance in school and trouble with the law because I had no stable place to live and was going through tough times. I wished I could focus on being a student, and not be making calls all day to figure out a place to sleep. Even talking and thinking about my past, gives me trauma. Once I was 18 and no longer had access to an attorney, I had to just self-advocate. However, due to these circumstances and other complicated factors, I was given an 800 by DCF, which discharged me from the agency.

Thinking back, if I had the support I have now, I wouldn't have been kicked out. After I was kicked out of DCF, I did research to see if there was anyone who can help me re-enter. I found the Center for Children's Advocacy and contacted an attorney there. With her help, I was able to re-enter DCF, and was identified as a McKinney Vento student, so my high school could better support me.

Now I also have legal representation at my DCF meetings to help advocate for me. In addition, through the Center, I was able to meet the paralegal, Tiffany, who sat down with me and helped call 211 for assistance with housing. Now, I have people in my corner who keep everything confidential and stick up for me. Without my legal team, I wouldn't have had the help of someone coordinating my services, would have not known about the McKinney Vento Status, the TSEA program, and the Youth Navigator. You do not expect someone at a young age to know and endure this alone.

I hope that my experience and my story motivates you to help other DCF-involved youth who don't know about The Center get the help and support they need. Everyone in DCF should have the right to an attorney. My goal is to now complete school and go to college. I am going to be successful and will not let my past dictate my future. Sincerely, Kai Greene, Manchester CT

March 3, 2020

To the Committee on Children:

Since I was 11 years old, DCF has been in my life. They have been the one constant factor. My mom, aunt and the rest of my family has always been in and out of my life. I got to where I am today, because my life at home was messed up. DCF let me go back with my mom and things weren't working out. She kept kicking me out and so I didn't want to stay with her; I was angry and I just didn't care about things

anymore. I went back into DCF, got mixed up with the wrong kids, and I did some really bad things that ended up getting me in trouble.

Then when I turned 18, DCF wanted to kick me out because I was locked up. They were threatening to take away all that I had – visits from my worker and case manager, my stipend to help me get by, the constant contact and supervision I had been getting for the last several years.

Thankfully, lawyers from the Center for Children's Advocacy were able to help me and stop DCF from closing my case. Now I will have support and assistance when I return home. I will be able to go to school, have a safe place to live, and have someone looking out for me. Other kids who are turning 18 that are involved with DCF should have the right to a lawyer too. Even though we may be considered adults, we still need and deserve a lawyer to help us understand our rights and advocate for us. I urge that you support Senate Bill 283 and help support youth like me.

Sincerely, Joshua from Hartford

March 3, 2020

Dear Chairs, Vice Chairs, Ranking Members, and Honorable Committee on Children Members:

Hello, my name is Jaqueline Swagerty. I have been in DCF care since I was around 12 years old. I am now 19 years old and have decided to voluntarily stay in DCF care due to my want to continue school. I graduated from Windsor High School in 2019 and am now attending Asnuntuck Community College to obtain my phlebotomist certification.

Awhile back, circumstances arose where things were not going well with a Therapeutic Foster Home I was in, so I was in need of a placement change and fast. I am very connected to my community and I know where to get help, so I worked with Our Piece of the Pie in Hartford, which is designed to help youth in care develop skills they may lack by not having stability. They were able to help me get an attorney, which allowed me to have an adult to help me advocate for myself.

Now, while I am considered an adult in terms of age, I am still sometimes treated like a child when it comes to explanations. Having an attorney has allowed me to have another adult who knows certain terms that I may not know or understand, or be able to ask about. Just because by law we are legally adults does not mean we do not need someone to help us navigate the system and the language in papers they ask us to sign, especially when we grew up without our parents, and mostly still don't have parents in our lives, like other teenagers still do. I am currently dealing with a situation with DCF. I was

initially told that I had 2 years to stay with DCF following high school graduation. My attorney, who I found by luck anyway, looked through paperwork letting me know I was only approved by DCF for 18 months, and that I was only supposed to go to vocational/technical school to pick up a trade. Had he not gone through the paperwork and read it thoroughly, I would not have known that I need to get my contract corrected.

It is important for us to know what we are signing and why we are signing it. We are at a vulnerable age without much stable support in our lives. Without a lawyer present and aware of the language, we could sign documents and not know nor understand fully what is being asked of us.

I fully support the suggestion to extend having a form of legal representation past the age of 18.

Jacqueline, 19