

July 24, 2018

The Honorable Jeb Hensarling
Chairman
House Financial Services Committee
2129 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Maxine Waters
Ranking Member
House Financial Services Committee
4340 Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr. Federal Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Sean P. Duffy
Chairman
House Subcommittee on Housing and Insurance
2129 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Emanuel Cleaver
Ranking Member
House Subcommittee on Housing and Insurance
4340 Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr. Federal Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: *Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act* (H.R. 2069) an amendment in the nature of a substitute

Dear Financial Services Committee Leaders,

It is with great enthusiasm that I provide you with this letter and a [link to a petition](#), written and signed by current and former foster youth from communities throughout the United States. We write to thank you for your kind attention to *The Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act* (H.R. 2069) (FSHO), for including it the April 17th hearing on how best to use housing choice vouchers, and to urge you to move the bill forward.

You have no doubt received a series of letters claiming that foster care alumni have been unwittingly led astray by smarter, more powerful forces in Washington, D.C. Nothing could be further from the truth. Let me assure you that there are no more sophisticated experts on the transition to adulthood than the young men and women who have navigated the intersection of childhood and adulthood completely alone, without the support of family. These young people have faced (and intend to fix) the entirely predictable phenomenon of government-created homelessness and the unforgivable unevenness in the distribution of housing and supportive services for youth leaving foster care.

As members of their state youth advisory boards (and subjects of a steady stream of academic surveys¹) they have had ample time to consider their own trajectories, listen to their peers, meet with consultants, and study the research on how best to prepare youth for economic independence in adulthood. Taking all of this together, they confirmed that not much has changed since the first foster youth survey² in 1983 and every survey since then – to be truly ready for independence in adulthood,

¹ See Pecora et al (2005), the Northwest Study of Former Foster Youth; Samuels & Pryce, (2008). “*What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Stronger. Survivalist Self-Reliance as Resilience and Risk Among Youth Adults Aging out of Foster Care.*”; Courtney et al (2012); Dworsky et al (2017), *The Midwest Study of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth*; Morton, M. (2018), *Voices of Youth Count*.

² Festinger, T. (1983). *No one ever asked us*. Columbia University Press: New York, NY

those youth who are able must be held to some semblance of self-sufficiency requirements, be employable, and have predictable access to an affordable housing subsidy as a platform for their success. Of course, this sentiment about self-sufficiency was confirmed when Congress passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (PL 110-351) by unanimous consent which allows states to draw down federal reimbursement for extending foster care to 21 ***but only for those youth who work or go to school no less than 80 hours per month.*** You will find no evidence of any lobbying effort now or at any point during the years leading up to the passage of that law by child welfare or housing advocacy groups opposing the work and school requirements. This is because that law, like FSHO is aimed, quite properly, at a small slice of the American public who are entering a formative, pivotal phase of human development.

More specifically, for the past six years, foster care alumni and young people who have experienced homelessness have met with members of Congress, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and national advocacy groups annually to find the best way to close the *obvious and persistent gaps through which youth fall into homelessness*. In 2016, they were fortunate to find a willing partner in Rep. Michael Turner who assigned his staff to work directly with the youth to turn their policy proposals into the legislative language that became the *Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act*. Mr. Turner was soon after joined by formidable foster youth champion and Foster Youth Caucus co-founder, Rep. Karen Bass, to shape this bill and shepherd it through to passage. The predictable housing and approach to self-sufficiency in the *Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act* is the best way to eliminate the gaps between public systems.

Nonetheless, many stakeholders have taken issue with the work and school requirements in the original version of FSHO. Thus, subcommittee staff went to great lengths to accommodate the concerns of advocates who think differently about the capacity of low-income youth and adults to use housing as a platform for success. We are extremely grateful that the subcommittee staff brokered a worthy compromise which retains all elements of the original bill:

- Early application after the age of 16 for foster youth who may need a voucher

and

- A top three federal preference (which we anticipate will be funded through new Family Unification Program Vouchers, voluntarily re-allocated FUP vouchers, and overtime via HUD's underutilized Tenant Protection Vouchers— for which FUP youth are already an eligible population)

FSHO also allows public housing authorities to select from options that best will meet the needs of youth within their communities:

Option #1

- Participating in education [(a) pursuing a high school diploma, GED, or postsecondary credential; or (b) enrolled in an institution of higher education as defined in statute]; or
- Participating in workforce development.

- At their discretion, PHAs may also consider employment as satisfying this option.

Option #2: Youth comply with terms & conditions applicable under the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program, if offered by the PHA.

Option #3: Using any combination of criteria listed in Options #1 – #2, local PHAs may design (or ask local workforce development agencies to assist in designing) their own self-sufficiency/active engagement requirement.

The bill also phases these self-sufficiency efforts in over 30 months and includes more generous exemptions that the Fostering Connections to Success Act such as excluding youth who are incapable of complying with the requirement due to a documented medical condition; a parent responsible for care of dependent child under 6; and those youth who are regular, active participants in a drug/alcohol rehabilitation program.

Finally, I believe it is important to point out that the scale of the problem that FSHO is designed to fix, while tragic, is certainly manageable. It is not the case that all of the 21,440 young people who age out of foster care would transition to a Housing Choice Voucher or a public housing unit. Instead, we predict that due to recent changes to child welfare law under the *Family First and Prevention Services Act of 2018* and proper utilization of foster care resources, the most likely candidates for these housing resources will be 21-year-olds at risk of homelessness, not the entire portfolio of youth aging out. The most recent AFCARS report indicates that the total number of 21-year-olds in care in 2016 was 2,129.³ It is a portion of this group of young adults would transition from independent living programs into a subsidy administered by a PHA after having been adequately prepared for adulthood, connected to work, and self-sufficiency services.

We trust that the Financial Services Committee will support this cost-effective, prudent, and thoughtful means by which to close the obvious and persistent gaps through which all too many young people fall into homelessness – offered to you and your staff by the young people themselves.

Thank you for all you do to improve the economic and housing opportunities for people throughout the U.S. If you have any questions for me or would like to meet with an alumna/alumnus of to discuss the foster care experience, housing challenges, or policy suggestions, please contact me at 202-270-7336 or rwhite@nchcw.org.

With much respect and admiration.



Ruth White, MSSA
Executive Director

³ USDHHS. (2016). AFCARS Report #24. Retrieved from the Administration for Children and Families Website: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport24.pdf>