

March 20, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Immediate Adjustments to the John H. Chafee Foster Care (Chafee) Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood in COVID-19 Relief Bill III

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader McCarthy, and Minority Leader Schumer,

We write on behalf of 54,000 foster youth, alumni, and allies who comprise the *Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Coalition* (the authors and supporters of “FSHO” S. 2803 and HUD’s Foster Youth to Independence “FYI” Initiative) to express our deep appreciation for everything you are doing to keep all Americans safe. Please know that your tireless efforts to combat the COVID-19 outbreak are not going unnoticed. The speed with which you have worked together to advance meaningful relief through Congress is awe-inspiring. We hope that in the midst of worrying about all of us, you find some time to rest and take care of yourselves. We send our prayers and best wishes that you, your staff members, and your families remain healthy and strong during this difficult time.

We understand that planning is underway for a third, equally impressive COVID-19 relief package. We trust that in crafting this legislation you will consider the health, safety, and housing stability of older youth in foster care and alumni at risk of homelessness, economic insecurity, and social disconnection as a result of COVID-19 closures. We support the range child welfare recommendations you have received from our fellow advocates nationwide – but we will tailor our suggestions to older youth and alumni of care.

Nearly 10,000 former foster youth live in on-campus housingⁱ. Our network of youth report that many, if not most, colleges have plans in place to allow former foster youth and homeless youth to remain in the dorms, to access their meal plans, and receive their work-study stipends during COVID-19 closures. For those youth without such options and in the event that these plans fall through, we offer the following suggestions to ensure that the **John H. Chafee Foster Care (Chafee) Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood** funding is available to prevent homelessness and economic insecurity during these difficult times.

Recommendation #1

Lift the statutory cap of 30% on room and board

Alumni, led by Lisa Dickson from ACTION Ohio, reached out to the Children’s Bureau on March 11, 2020 to urge the associate commissioner to issue guidance to child welfare professionals to tap the Chafee Program to meet the housing and income needs for students displaced from dorms and work study arrangements. Associate Commissioner Milner agreed that the most expedient tool available to help former foster youth is the Chafee Act. Dr. Milner issued a letter to child welfare professionals imploring them to consider tapping Chafee funds to meet the needs of displaced youth on March 12, 2020.

In this letter, Dr. Milner encourages states to tap the 30 percent of their Chafee allotment available for “room and board.” This averages out to roughly \$780,000 per state but much of this funding is tied up in existing

contracts or otherwise allocated. **Thus, we recommend that Congress lift this cap temporarily as states deal with the COVID-19 crisis.**

Recommendation #2

Automatically extend Chafee eligibility to age 23 across the U.S.

The Family First Prevention Services Act allowed states the option of extending eligibility to age 23. Some states are not aware that they have the latitude to add this older population to their State Child and Family Services Plans and thus, forfeit the opportunity to assist this vulnerable group of emerging adults. In order to ensure that states can adequately serve youth through the age of 23 during this national crisis, **we urge Congress to include an automatic extension of Chafee eligibility to age 23 in the emergency supplemental bill.**

Recommendation #3

Infuse \$200 million in supplemental dollars for unexpected housing needs, financial hardship, and social connection during “social distancing”

We suggest that Congress increase Chafee funding by \$200 million (to a total of \$347 million) to facilitate the COVID-19 emergency response. This increase allows states the necessary funding to accommodate additional youth up to age 23 and increased need, generally, related to COVID-19 disruptions. Increased funding is necessary because Chafee funding has lost its agility over the years. Much of the funding is tied up in services contracts and thus unavailable to meet the economic and emergency housing needs of former foster youth.

An immediate infusion of funding will allow states to meet needs related housing, lost wages, and other disruptions related the prevention of disease spread. This funding can also be used to put into place the necessary equipment to access online learning platforms. Chafee is an important tool to keep youth on the path to independence and self-sufficiency during this confusing time.

It is also to point out that during this time of crisis, youth who are displaced from the community within their school and dorm may feel isolated. Child welfare agencies can use Chafee funds to make sure that child welfare offers access to programs, telehealth professionals, mental healthcare professionals, or mentors to ensure ongoing social connections. Chafee is designed to be nimble enough to allow for the purchase of any and all equipment that a young person might need to remain connected to siblings, case managers, fictive kin, or whomever it is that can help them avoid social isolation as we all practice social distancing.

Again, we are indebted to all of you for your tireless efforts to keep us safe. If you have any questions about these recommendations please feel free to contact Ruth White at rwhite@nchcw.org or 202-270-7336 or Lisa Dickson lisa@fosteractionohio.org.

With admiration and appreciation,



Ruth White, MSSA
Executive Director, NCHCW



Jamole Callahan, BA
Director of Training & Development, ACTION Ohio

¹ Of the nearly 12 million college students under the age of 24 in the US, 72,000 are current and former foster youth who were considered financially independent and receiving federal financial aid¹ and of this group, roughly 17,000 received Education & Training Vouchers¹. Information regarding how many of these youth live in dorms is not collected or reported nationally. The majority of these young adults (70%) are pursuing (quite successfully) certificates from two-year colleges; while 30% are attending four-year colleges. Nearly half (46%) of students at four-year institutions live on campus, Thus, NCHCW estimates that approximately 10,000 former foster youth live in college dorms³.

¹ US Government Accountability Office. (2016). *Actions Needed to Improve Access to Federal Financial Assistance for Homeless and Foster Youth*. <https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/d16343.pdf>

²Fernandes-Alcantara, A. (2019). *Youth Transitioning from Foster Care: Background and Federal Programs*. Congressional Research Services. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL34499.pdf>

³ Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2020). *Today's College Students*. <https://postsecondary.gatesfoundation.org/what-were-learning/todays-college-students/>