



Joe Bock, Acting Associate Commissioner
US Children's Bureau
Administration for Children & Families
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
330 C Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

February 12, 2021

Dear Commissioner Bock,

We write on behalf of ACTION Ohio, the National Center for Housing & Child Welfare, and 54,000 foster youth, alumni, and allies who comprise the *Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Coalition* (the authors and supporters of "FSHO" S. 2803/H.R. 4300 which recently became law and HUD's Foster Youth to Independence "FYI" Initiative) to express our deep appreciation for everything you are doing to keep child welfare professionals informed during this difficult time. Please know that your tireless efforts are appreciated. We hope that in the midst of worrying about all of us, you can find some time to rest and take care of yourself and your family.

Thank you for moving swiftly at the outset of the pandemic to issue a letter urging child welfare professionals to reach out to former foster youth living in college dorms at the outset of the pandemic. Nearly 10,000 former foster youth live in on-campus housing¹. Because of your swift action, our network of youth reported that nearly all universities had plans in place to allow former foster youth and homeless youth to remain in the dorms during COVID-19 closures. Many colleges allowed them to access meal plans and receive their work-study stipends as well. In fact, some young people have provided their college administrators with a copy of the **March 12, 2020** letter from Elizabeth Darling as evidence of their eligibility to remain on campus. We are all to be congratulated – the youth, the advocates, the child welfare professionals, the Children's Bureau, and the higher education professionals for a successful response.

Since that time, the Children's Bureau has made every effort to reach out to foster youth and alumni by holding numerous Town Hall events and other meetings to gather information about the pandemic's unique impact upon youth who failed to find permanency upon emancipation for state care. Having listened intently to their stories you must be deeply troubled about the considerable hardship that this protracted COVID-19 response and economic shutdown is having on former foster youth.

Thus, we are confident that in the face of this suffering you, Catherine Heath, and the rest of the career staff have been eagerly awaiting the passage of the Davis-Walorski provisions in this most Covid-19 relief package. It was disappointing to witness the passage of four Covid-19 relief bills that did not include any emergency relief for older youth. In the interim, the challenges faced by alumni have accumulated and worsened.

One advantage of having to wait nearly one year before the passage of the "The Supporting Foster Youth and Families Through the Pandemic Act (H.R. 7947)" is that the Children's Bureau career staff have had nearly a year to prepare to quickly distribute the emergency supplemental funding for Chafee as a formula grant along with a simple notice to the field. State independent living coordinators will be relieved to hear that Congress has provided sufficient funds and authority to respond to alumni in crisis through age 26 and eliminated the thirty percent cap on room and board. State budget officers will be happy to find that these supplemental funds do not require a match.

We trust that Children's Bureau career staff shares the same level of seriousness and urgency of Reps. Bass, Walorski, Davis (copied) and other elected officials who did the yeoman's work necessary to assure that **emergency temporary supports and flexibilities for older foster youth** were included in the Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021.

We urge you to issue these funds and straightforward instructions on or before March 1, 2021.

Initially, to access these emergency funds, alumni will no doubt be encouraged to call their former worker or the local Independent Living Coordinator. This will work fine in the interim.

[Type here]

However, to support existing child welfare staff, we again recommend that the Children's Bureau establish a National Hotline/Warmline for disconnected youth with questions about Covid-19 related economic and housing-related crisis and questions. In the same way that the National Runaway Safeline was established to serve as a national communications mechanism for runaway and homeless youth, we urge the Children's Bureau to establish or re-purpose existing phone services to field calls from the nation's former foster youth who have been displaced and/or launched into crisis as a result of the pandemic.

We hope that the Children's Bureau will consider formalizing such a hotline or resource center for youth to reach out to when they are in need. Perhaps one improvement that will come as a result of this national crisis is the discovery that such a resource should have existed all along. We are at your disposal to get this up and running as quickly as possible. Our organizations are happy to help the Children's Bureau create a more formal structure for a hotline of this nature going forward as well. In the spirit of Peer Support, we recommend that those who would serve to man this future hotline would be alumni of foster care and allies who work specifically with this population. We believe that if the Children's Bureau is willing to make a commitment to move forward and make a commitment to help create this resource, it would continue to underscore the priority that this office places on older youth as a population worthy of attention and as a wealth of information.

Such a hotline could serve first and foremost to address questions related to existing federal resources, such as Chafee and ultimately grow into a powerful mechanism to connect foster care youth and alumni callers with state-specific resources and information. While we support the creation of a hotline, please do not the establishment of a hotline nor anything else delay the release of these desperately needed emergency relief funds. **We look forward to the issuance of these funds on or before March 1, 2021.**

Again, we are indebted to you for your tireless efforts to keep us safe and to move the child welfare system forward through these difficult times. 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

CC: The Honorable Karen Bass
The Honorable Danny K. Davis
The Honorable Jackie Warloski

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/>