



**TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY ANTHONY, YOUTH ADVOCATE, YOUTH FOSTERING  
CHANGE TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH  
HEARING ON OLDER YOUTH PERMANENCY  
MAY 14, 2019**

I want to thank Chairpersons Boback and Petrarca and Members of the Children and Youth Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on the important issue of older youth permanency.

I am an advocate from Youth Fostering Change. I have been in the program for 2 years. Last year we choose to create a project on permanency, and we are testifying today because we do not want other youth to experience what we have. Permanency is important all youth, but especially for youth aging out of care and for those who may not have anywhere stable to go. Not having a stable home can cause more damage and traumatic experiences for them. Permanency is also important because it means ensuring that a child can be in 1 safe loving home- a child doesn't deserve to be placed in foster home after foster home, causing more trauma. Children and youth deserve to have a trustworthy family that looks at them like their own. For me, when I was in care, I never stayed in one spot. I was always being bounced around from home to home. It wasn't fair because as youth it's something you have no control over. No youth should ever be in an unsafe home, or environment, constantly moved around, or placed in large group homes where they don't have or make connections with caring adults and families.

**YOUTH FOSTERING CHANGE RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE PERMANENCY**

To ensure that youth no longer experience what we did when we were in foster care, we recommend facilitating placement stability for foster youth to gain permanency. To achieve permanency, it should be known that foster youth need to be placed in a safe loving home environment. They should be in stable living arrangements where they are secure, treated with respect, cared for, and loved. People should be checking on them and making sure that youth don't experience unexpected changes in where they live without anyone notifying them in advance. Youth should also know about any new changes to where they are going to live in advance, including the location, when they will arrive, with whom they will stay, and the kind of place they will live i.e. a foster home, or group home. Professionals who work with youth in care should also speak with youth directly to learn what they want and need in a family, if you ask us, we will tell you. If a youth appears to reject the idea of permanency, people shouldn't write off their feelings, instead ask them why they are hesitant instead of just ending the conversation. They may be hesitant because of the past negative experiences that they've had. Professionals should then continue to follow up with youth about how they feel in the places they are living, whether it's a foster home or a group home. They should follow up and ask youth about any success' and challenges—both are key to building trust and achieving permanency.

Ensuring that youth are in safe, caring environments is a key to youth achieving lifelong permanency. Having stability enables youth to develop relationships with people in their community and maintain supportive relationships that last beyond care. Youth have a better chance at gaining permanency when they are in consistent placements where they are respected, listened to, and connected to the resources they need. For my story, having placement stability could have changed so many things in my life for the better. I wish someone would have asked me what was going on, ensured I was protected in my homes and that I wasn't constantly moved around. I am now at a place in my life where I understand just how

much not stability having has impacted by life and how important it is for other youth in foster care. This is why we all chose to work on permanency this year and I truly hope that you all used what we've shared today and our recommendations from Tools-For-Success as a guide for professionals and policy makers like yourself to implement policies, laws and practices that ensure youth have placement stability and permanency before they leave the foster care system. The decisions that youth make moving forward can drastically change the outcomes for youth in foster care.

Thank you for listening to me and my peers testify today. We look forward to continuing this work with you all.

Submitted by LaKeema Jones, Youth Fostering Change, Juvenile Law Center, 215-625-0551



**TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY ALEXIS ANDINO, YOUTH ADVOCATE, YOUTH FOSTERING CHANGE TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH HEARING ON OLDER YOUTH PERMANENCY MAY 14, 2019**

First, I want to take the opportunity to thank Chairpersons Boback and Petrarca and the Members of the Children and Youth Committee for the opportunity to provide my testimony on the important issue of older youth permanency.

I am an advocate from Youth Fostering Change and have been in the program for two years. When I first joined Youth Fostering Change, a youth advocacy program at Juvenile Law Center, I was still in the foster care system. During that time, I had to deal with many hardships, but I wanted to work closely with professionals to make improvements in the system. I especially wanted to gain this experience as I am currently in college and hoping to put myself in a position of power to one day be able to make the policy changes that I want for future foster youth. Based on my experiences, while there are positive changes being made there still need to be many improvements to impact the lives of all foster youth. I believe we can do so much more together. I'm glad to do this work with Youth Fostering Change because it allows me to tell my story, while fighting for future youth encountering the system to give them a better chance at a good life. It also helps me to network and be heard by professionals who, like you, are in a position to make a difference in the lives of youth in foster care.

The work we did as a group on our recent permanency toolkit is so important because everyone's definition of permanency is different. With the toolkit, we as youth with experience in the foster care system can shed light on what is really needed to better permanency outcomes for older youth. Our needs don't stop at 18 or 21; the importance of permanency is lifelong. Think about your own lives. I'm sure many of you still go see your parents and interact with your family members and you're all well over 18. Having those connections for a lifetime- that's permanency.

I would like to share some pieces of my story with you all. I entered the system at 10 and moved around a lot. For the first 8 years I was placed with foster families. I was in 15 different homes. I then decided at 18 to stay in the foster care system until 21, but I didn't anticipate that the transition of aging out of the system. It was really tough and emotional. It didn't help that the team of people who were supposed to have my best interests in mind, didn't start my transition planning until three months before I fully aged out, despite me constantly asking them for help earlier. During those three months, I felt lost, stressed, and abandoned, and like the system was saying to me "Hey, our job is done." This process didn't really help me, and I didn't feel good about it at all; especially since I had already gone through a tumultuous experience during my time in care. Now at 21, I don't have many supportive or consistent adults in my life. I believe that if I had received assistance earlier and help to build and main these connections, I would have felt more prepared and in control of my current situation and the direction of my life.

My experience in the foster care system is why I know how important permanency is for all youth. I think it's especially vital for older youth who may be facing new transitions in their lives. Everyone should care

about permanency because everyone needs somebody or some type of support. People should think about the system as if these youth could be their own children. Think about your own lives- you all wouldn't let your child go through difficult journeys and life changes by themselves, so why should youth in unfortunate situations have to go through life without the support of family and feeling so alone? Many youths in foster care do not have control over being put in the system, so feeling like someone cares enough to want to support and care for you can make all the difference.

## **YOUTH FOSTERING CHANGE RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE PERMANENCY**

To have successful permanency planning, youth need to be on board, invested, and clear about their permanency goals. **We recommend communicating the importance of permanency and meaningfully engaging youth in the permanency planning process.** This means listening to the youth's views and concerns. Engaging youth should start with including them in discussions and preparing them for planning meetings and court dates. To do this effectively you must be mindful of previous trauma and adolescent development when communicating about a youth's case planning and when building relationships with supportive adults. Think about how meetings are planned, including the logistics for youth to attend and fully participate. We believe these recommendations can help to positively impact youth by insisting workers start the permanency planning earlier and include youth in the individualized process from beginning to end. It will help youth to become more expressive, involved in their own lives, and help them to be more self-sufficient. I feel that my plan would have been better if I had really been included, engaged and listened to.

It is crucial for you to understand how you as lawmakers can help make sure youth in the system can transition into adulthood with the proper resources and support. We hope that the toolkit can be used to help professionals work better with youth to find families and to help youth develop life skills and supportive connections to be happy, stable, and feel they can achieve their goals and dreams. We hope you will read our toolkit, which we are submitting with this testimony so you can learn more about this issue and our recommendations. We believe this tool and all of you can play a key part in ensuring youth in the foster care system achieve permanency, and never leave the system without support.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to working with you to improve the foster care system.

**Submitted by:** Alexis Andino, Youth Fostering Change, Juvenile Law Center, 215-625-0551



**TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY ANTHONY SIMPSON, YOUTH ADVOCATE, YOUTH FOSTERING CHANGE TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH HEARING ON OLDER YOUTH PERMANENCY**

**MAY 14, 2019**

I want to thank Chairpersons Boback and Petrarca and Members of the Children and Youth Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on the important issue of older youth permanency.

I am 22, and the father of a handsome young man who motivates me to be great every day and to continue to work with youth fighting for change so that young men like myself and young children like him all have opportunities to enact change no matter the barriers placed in our path. I am also a third-year advocate from Youth Fostering Change. Youth Fostering Change (YFC) is an advocacy program at Juvenile Law Center for youth who are currently or formerly involved in the child welfare system.

YFC researches issues affecting youth in foster care and analyzes current advocacy strategies. In 2018, YFC's project focused on older youth permanency. We decided on this topic because many of us aged out without family or connections to supportive adults, or we were about to leave the system without gaining permanency and were uncertain about our lives after foster care. We believe all youth deserve permanency and supportive adult connections—both are essential to success in adulthood. Based on what we know about our own stories and those of our peers in foster care, we created a toolkit—Tools For Success-- and recommendations to improve permanency outcomes for children in foster care, regardless of circumstances or age. This publication identifies some of the challenges we faced or are still facing as older youth in care. Our publication focuses on what social workers and others working in the child welfare system can do to support us in finding family. **Today we want to tell you about our recommendations for change so that we can make sure youth in foster care enter adulthood with the family and support we need to be successful and achieve our dreams. We hope you will read our Guide which we are submitting with this testimony to learn more about this issue and our recommendations.**

Today we will be presenting the recommendations we collectively developed in our guide, Tools for Success, to improve the permanency process. Most of our recommendations draw directly from the memories of our time in care when those working closest with us did not consider or incorporate our experiences into our permanency planning. This would later prove to be a detrimental with negative ramifications that continue to reverberate through our lives today. For me, personally, permanency planning was never a topic my legal or social work team ever formally presented to me. While they sometimes discussed post-secondary educational options with me and asked me what I envisioned would be my best options moving forward- these talks were never focused on family or the reality of aging out. Instead, these conversations seemed to be hypothetical conversations to get me thinking more about my future but did not really deal with the reality I was about to face when I left care where I would be on my own.

Having the ability to steer your life's direction is often the most daunting aspect of growing up for most youths but as a kid in foster care, this is all I craved. Having a permanency plan that was cohesive and had



long-lasting supports and reliable familial infrastructure would've allowed me to be motivated to picture my future as an adult. It would have ensured I created goals that reflected my interests and strengths and had the support of family and adults who could help me get there.

To truly drive home the impact, you all can have on improving permanency for other youth like me we created our recommendations to improve permanency in Tools For Success. For the purpose of this testimony, I will highlight only two recommendations from the toolkit.

## **YOUTH FOSTERING CHANGE RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE PERMANENCY**

**To improve permanency outcomes for older youth in the foster care system we recommend focusing on relational and legal permanency during the permanency process.** Legal permanency is when someone takes legal responsibility for you as a parent or guardian. Relational permanency means a strong, long lasting relationship with caring adults. Pursuing both legal and relational permanency options for youth in the foster care system are vital and key to youth having stability and multiple supportive connections. Having this equal focus on both legal and relational permanency is beneficial to a youths overall legal standing. Doing this together provides youth with additional positive consistent support and guidance as we grow up. Examples of relational permanency can include connecting youth with supportive kin who may be unable to provide financial or housing supports but provide a youth connection to their culture, family, or are a willing ear or shoulder to cry on. This should include connecting youth to other siblings or extended family members that offer a secure network of love and support. To limit a youth to one group or individual who is able to provide purely material things can cut off the potential for a supportive network that more closely resembles the many connections that kids who have not entered foster care may have in their own families.

**We also believe it is vital that youth are connected to resources and develop life skills to become successful adults. To so do this, we recommend ensuring youth have a comprehensive transition plan that includes direct connections to services and resources for life after care.** Permanency and transition planning are the most important discussions you can have with a youth, as it encompasses their career, housing goals and other types of supports they feel they need. Having a transition planning meeting that includes follow up and connection to helpful and useful resources can truly help a youth. Effective transition planning in collaboration with a youth can help youth have a more solution-based mindset and goes a long way in helping professionals create trusting relationships with young adults. Regardless of the legal permanency goal, having a secure transition plan is vital to a youth's success and can be essential in maintaining their stability and adult connections after foster care.

If implemented these recommendations help to create a more youth-focused approach to the permanency planning process and can keep youth engaged and excited about what the future may hold. As a youth in foster care, the future can often be uncertain, with youth feeling that their life is heading towards a direction not of their choosing. There is so much decided for youth that is not in their control. Having this lack of control and engagement in the planning process only fosters disengagement and feelings of hopelessness for youth. In addition, not having a comprehensive plan that includes the resources you need like housing, healthcare, and supportive adult connections can lead youth to experiences a host of challenges after care like homelessness and lack of access to healthcare. Having permanency planning coupled with a comprehensive transition plan could eradicate the many issues that youth face when exiting the system.



It is my belief that a caring and supportive team backing a youth not only shows a youth that they deserve to have a loving, safe, environments and that there are adults who care for them. To be removed from the home you grew up in is a terribly traumatic event in any young person life. However, there is still time to do better and ensure that the still thousands of kids entering the system get quality treatment and never leave care without permanent connections and resources to live healthy, happy, productive lives. I hope you all consider the recommendations we have offered today and thank you all for listening  
I hope that others like you in positions to really change the lives for youth in the foster care system continue to listen. Listen to the youth you hope to serve, listen to the children who are now adults who have experienced the system and all its flaws. Listen to the workers helping to support these youth, and to the resource parents who have seen with their own eyes the transforming power of love. Please know that your decisions matter to the youth whose life you have the potential to change.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to working with you.

**Submitted by:** Anthony Simpson, Youth Fostering Change, Juvenile Law Center, 215-625-0551

# Juvenile Law Center

Fighting for the rights  
and well-being of youth

## TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY MARCIA HOPKINS, JUVENILE LAW CENTER, TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH HEARING ON OLDER YOUTH PERMANENCY

MAY 14, 2019

Thank you Chairpersons Boback and Petrarca and Members of the Children and Youth Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on the important issue of older youth permanency. I am the Senior Manager of Program and Policy at the Juvenile Law Center. We are the first non-profit public interest law firm for children in the country. Juvenile Law Center advocates for youth in the child welfare and justice systems. We fight for children in these systems by using an array of strategies which include litigation, appellate advocacy, submission of amicus briefs, policy reform, public education, training, consulting and strategic communications.

At Juvenile Law Center we also work directly with young people who have been impacted by these systems to develop policy strategies and push for system reform. We do this through our Youth Advocacy Program. Founded in 2008, Juvenile Law Center's Youth Advocacy Program has prepared young people ages 15-22 to lead advocacy and policy reform efforts in their local communities and beyond.

Our Youth Advocacy Program is made up of two projects, Juveniles for Justice, which is a project that works with young people who have current or former involvement in the juvenile justice system and Youth Fostering Change (YFC) for youth who are currently or formerly involved in the child welfare system. Today you will hear from current youth advocates from Youth Fostering Change, *Anthony, Keema, and Alexis*. Our advocates use their lived experience and expertise about the child welfare system to make change and are the best suited to testify to you all today about improving permanency outcomes for youth in the child welfare system.

In our program, youth advocates develop leadership skills, political knowledge, communication and storytelling skills, and a sense of community. By sharing their personal experiences, youth advocates affect policy change through advocacy, media outreach, and public education. Youth advocates determine a strategy to address an issue they have identified as important to them. They develop policy recommendations and a campaign to raise awareness about the issue and their work. Past projects have addressed issues such as: access to higher education for youth in foster care, poor treatment in placements and facilities, and involvement in planning and in court. Last year, Youth Fostering Change focused on the issue of permanency or family for older youth. In a moment, I will lead our youth advocates in a presentation to you on this issue.

It may come as a shock to you that nationally, each year about 20,000 youth age out of the foster care system without any permanent family connections. Many of these young people will leave the system and will face challenges with homelessness, gaining willful employment, and continuing to access supportive resources, and overall face challenges to sustaining and supporting themselves. In the state of Pennsylvania, 33% or 8,639 of Pennsylvania's foster youth are transitioned aged youth, this means aged 14-21 of these youth 49% are in group care or institutions and 49% age out of care without any permanent connections to a family. 37% experience homelessness or unstable housing after leaving care. These numbers should be unacceptable in our state.

As someone who cares about young people, and works in this field it behooves me to say that we not only have an opportunity to improve the lives of children and youth but we have an obligation to collectively take action to implement law, policies, and practices that will increase family connections, and connect young people to permanent loving, supportive families. We must-ensure that not one youth ages out of care without the support of family and permanent connections.

I thank you all again for having us here today and hope that when you hear the testimony of Anthony, Keema and Alexis that you are not just moved by their stories but are motivated to take on their recommendations for change. I have the privilege to work closely with these young people to do truly transformative work. Anthony, Keema and Alexis are some of my best partners in strategically and thoughtfully thinking about how existing laws, and policies can be used, or new ones created to drastically change the experiences of all young people in the child welfare system. They work tirelessly to push for system reform, using their own stories as a catalyst for change to ensure that other youth with experience in the child welfare system are loved, supported, and grow up happy and healthy adults. I hope that you will continue this work with us to ensure that every child leaves the foster care system to a family where they are treated with dignity, love and care for a lifetime.

Thank you.

**Submitted by:** Marcia Hopkins, Juvenile law Center, [mhopkins@jlc.org](mailto:mhopkins@jlc.org), 215-609-9876 ext. 119