



March 27, 2020

The Honorable JB Pritzker
Governor, State of Illinois
100 W. Randolph Street
Chicago, Illinois. 60601

Marc Smith, Acting Director
Illinois Department of Children and Family Services
100 West Randolph Street
Chicago, Illinois. 60601

Dear Governor Pritzker and Acting DCFS Director Marc Smith:

The Foster Care Alumni of America – Illinois Chapter mission is to ensure a high quality of life for those in and from foster care through the collective voice of alumni. We intend to erase the differences in opportunities and outcomes that exist for people in and from foster care compared to those who have not experienced foster care.

We recognize the challenges COVID-19 has placed on you and your administration and appreciate your leadership in this unprecedented time. Youth leaving the care of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) – those who are “aging out” of the system – to live on their own are among the most vulnerable in our state, and unfortunately, that vulnerability has increased in the last few weeks and will continue to do so during this crisis. Illinois provides services to youth in care until the age of 21, although youth may age out of care beginning at the age of 18. According to DCFS data, in FY 18 - the most current data available to us - 707 youth over the age of 18 aged out of foster care. Youth who aged out of care recently, and who will be aging out of care during the COVID-19 crisis, are at high risk for loss of wages, mental health issues, and homelessness. Many of the dedicated child welfare professionals continue to assist and support former youth in care on an informal basis after the youth age out, but that assistance is not mandated or uniform, nor does it provide concrete assistance such as housing.

One example is Josue, who will turn 21 on April 24, 2020. Josue entered care almost immediately after he was born. The court terminated his parents’ rights in 2006, but unfortunately, DCFS was never able to locate a permanent home for him. He was placed in

several foster homes until the trauma he suffered in those homes landed him in residential treatment and then in his current transitional living program, funded by DCFS, where he receives services to learn to live independently. Josue has worked hard to better himself. He actively participates in the Youth Job Center. He worked at Curt's Cafe and 10Q Chicken, and was employee of the month in September 2019, and he was very proud. He is working to complete his GED before turning 21.

Josue is the recipient of a CHA housing voucher and anticipated spending the next few weeks with a housing advocate to locate an apartment to live in after his birthday. He also continues to seek employment to help with his living expenses. At this time, his ability to work with the housing advocate is severely questionable. If he is unable to locate an apartment, sign a lease, and move prior to his birthday, he will be homeless.

At a time when young people of Josue's age are returning to the homes of their parents all over the country, we ask that you consider the plight of our youth in care who do not have that option. The state stepped in and took over for their parents years ago because the youth were being abused or neglected, and the state needs to keep its doors open to these youth during this crisis. We cannot ignore the potential imminent harm to these young adults. The state should not neglect them.

The FCAA-IL is requesting that your recent Executive Order in Response to COVID-19, (COVID-19 EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 8) be amended to include the following modification:

- Automatic extension of services provided to youth who aged out of DCFS care during the past 6 months and to those who will turn 21 during the COVID-19 crisis. These services would include housing, food, unemployment, and casework assistance targeted at assisting youth access employment, mental health and medical care, and safe, stable and affordable housing.

We have the following suggestions regarding how to accomplish the automatic extension of services, and we are open to discussion about additional possibilities:

- Continued support for DCFS housing options for youth who recently aged out of care and for youth who will age out of care during the crisis, including foster homes, transitional living programs, independent living programs, etc. To the extent any licensing provisions would be violated by permitting a 21-year old to remain in the placement, temporary waiver of the licensing prohibitions;

- Currently, DCFS may extend services for a youth beyond the age of 21. The policy, however, is very restrictive. For example, it requires that a request be made at least 60 days prior to the youth's 21st birthday, that each extension can only be approved for 30 days, and that a youth can be ineligible for further extensions if their caseworker does not submit paperwork in time for an additional extension. We ask that these restrictive requirements be waived for youth currently on extensions and for future requests during the crisis;
- For youth who left care at age 18, automatic case re-opening for DCFS services upon youth request prior to the 21st birthday. Currently, the law allows for DCFS to reopen a case of a youth between ages 18 and 21 for services, and also allows a youth to petition the court under the Juvenile Court Act for their court case to be reopened in order to monitor the services being provided when it is in the youth's best interest. Because access to court is severely restricted at this time, requests for assistance by youth between ages 18 and 21 should be automatically granted;
- Eligibility for some housing assistance programs (Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers) require that a youth's court case close prior to the youth's 21st birthday. Sometimes court orders are entered to close the youth's case within days of the youth's 21st birthday in order to preserve eligibility for the voucher. Because courts will not be entering these orders during the crisis, we ask that this requirement for eligibility for FUP housing vouchers be waived.
- Some youth aging out of care are eligible to receive "emancipation funds" intended to assist the youth with setting up an independent household. Receipt of these funds is dependent on the youth completing certain tasks, such as participating in a financial literacy course. We ask that all tasks for eligibility that youth cannot participate in because of the COVID-19 crisis be waived. To the extent possible, caseworkers should discuss financial planning with youth, and youth should be directed to online financial planning resources that they would be expected to use.
- Ensuring that the State takes full advantage of the federal funding available through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood. The Chafee Program is intended to support current and former foster youth between the ages of 14 and 21, or up to age 23 in states that extend foster care to age 21, which Illinois has done.

Once more thank you for your hard work and dedication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Below are additional people and organizations that support this request.

Sincerely,

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