

**Fostering Youth Success Alliance
The Children's Aid Society
Prepared for the Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2017-18 Executive Budget Proposal:
Higher Education
Tuesday, January 24, 2017**

Good afternoon, my name is Jessica Maxwell, and this testimony is being submitted on behalf of the statewide Fostering Youth Success Alliance (FYSA). I would like to thank Chair Kenneth LaValle of the New York State Senate, and Chair Deborah Glick of the New York State Assembly, and the honorable members of the Committee on Higher Education for the opportunity to provide testimony about the 2017-18 executive budget proposal. I am here to address the Educational Opportunity Program funding and, more specifically, the **Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI)**. First established in the 2015-16 budget, FYCSI aims to bridge the gap from foster care to college success, for the state's most vulnerable youth. There are currently two cohorts of students who are on the path to college success, participating in FYCSI across 70 college campuses. We are happy that FYCSI was funded in Governor Cuomo's executive budget proposal for \$1.5 million, **but there is not enough. We know that it takes \$1.5 million to support each cohort of students, each year to have a reasonable chance of success, and the Governor's budget falls short of the \$4.5 million needed this year.** If authorized today, the Governor's executive proposal would cut resources from an entire cohort of students that are currently in college, and have no other resources to rely on to help them through college.

FYSA is a statewide advocacy group that, through collaboration, advocacy, and youth empowerment, aims to improve the socioeconomic, physical and mental health, housing, and educational outcomes for youth in and aging out of foster care and their successful transition to independence. The alliance is comprised of concerned providers, activists, and youth who are committed to advocating for policy changes and improved, expanded programs and services for youth in and aging out of care in New York. FYSA is housed at and managed by The Children's Aid Society (Children's Aid).

Children's Aid works to ensure that kids of every age living in our targeted neighborhoods can capitalize on their potential and talent, and that there are no limits to their achievement. We have been helping young people and their families succeed and thrive for over 160 years by always focusing on how we can do a better job and where our experience and expertise is needed most. Today, we have concentrated our work in four neighborhoods—Harlem, northern Staten Island, the South Bronx, and Washington Heights. Each has a past history of a strong middle class and the prosperity that comes with it. And the people who live there want the same things parents everywhere want: they want a brighter future for their family and hope that opportunity won't pass them by. Every day, we build well-being for the nearly 50,000 children and families that we serve through our work in four areas: education, health and wellness, social and emotional supports, and family stabilization. Additionally,

we provide family, therapeutic, and medical foster care, and adoption services. In 2013, we served about 700 children and youth in family-based foster homes and completed 90 adoptions.

Youth in Foster Care in New York State

In New York State there are approximately 20,000 children and youth in foster care, of which 40% are adolescents and young adults ages 14 and above.¹ Many youth leave care without the support of a caring adult or family, and when barriers or emergencies arise, many don't have savings, relatives, or friends to rely on. When discharged, youth are expected to learn how to be an adult through trial and error. When presented with obstacles, youth are left to navigate the complexities of the adult public services and benefits systems.

For any youth seeking to go to college, the college and financial aid application processes are often daunting tasks. For youth in the foster care system and those who have aged out of care, those responsibilities might seem like insurmountable obstacles. Many lack supportive adults to help navigate confusing applications and processes before ultimately making huge decisions. Even generous financial aid packages still leave gaps that do not cover the full costs of attending college. In the last budget season, FYSA advocated for the establishment of a comprehensive statewide initiative—the Foster College Success Campaign—aimed at not only closing the financial gaps youth face in attending, but also providing the necessary on-campus academic and social support services. A college degree is a recognized pathway out of poverty and can help youth make a successful transition to independence. In the FY 2016 budget, the state allocated \$1.5 million to establish cohort 1 of the FYCSI. Under the statute establishing FYCSI, the program requires that students be served through the opportunity programs (EOP/HEOP/SEEK/College Discovery) at participating higher education institutions, under the oversight of the New York State Education Department. This was a welcomed decision, given the historical success of the opportunity programs. Participating institutions include University at Buffalo, Rochester Institute of Technology, St. Lawrence University, LeMoyne College, Stoney Brook University, and Columbia University.

Since the state made this investment, much progress has been made over the past 18 months to implement this program. Additionally, the state invested \$3 million in the FY17 budget to continue support for cohort 1 and establish cohort 2. **We are already seeing a positive impact of this program, with a 98% retention rate for cohort 1 (352 students) from year 1 (2015-16 academic year) to year 2 (2016-17 academic year).** With this additional funding, schools are able to provide more robust academic and supportive services on campuses. Because foster youth face huge gaps in resources, funding from this initiative is needed to help youth meet basic needs, such as paying for dormitories, to providing funds to assist in covering food and personal care. By removing financial barriers, foster youth now have the opportunity to focus more intently on their academics instead of juggling multiple jobs to pay for college.

Central to facilitating the implementation of FYCSI is the ability to identify students who would benefit from the new funding allocation. Under the statute establishing FYCSI, the program requires that students be served through the opportunity programs (EOP/HEOP/SEEK/College Discovery) at

¹ New York State Office of Children and Family Services CCR Data as of January 1, 2103.

participating higher education institutions. Due to lack of awareness and inconsistent information, foster youth often do not apply to opportunity programs on their applications during the admission process, thus locking them out of the program for their entire collegiate experience. In New York State, the number of current and former foster youth enrolling in college is on an upward trend. However, as compared to 60% of the general population that attends college after high school, foster youth attend at a third of that rate².

Educational Opportunity Programs were established to ensure that underrepresented and nontraditional students that possess the potential to be successful in academia could attend college by removing the major barriers to entry. Financial and academic barriers are just two of the many challenges students in opportunity programs face. Many of these students come from minority backgrounds, and most often these students are the first in their family to attempt achieving a college education. Youth in foster care are the very definition of why opportunity programs were created, and these youth are in need of additional supports to attempt matriculation. Youth in foster care are overwhelmingly black and Latino, often times coming from families trapped in generational poverty. Generally, youth in care have experienced disruptions in their education and personal life, and stability is not something these youth are accustomed to. When obstacles are removed, foster youth can and do develop resiliency skills and are able to persevere.

As the job market continues to professionalize, almost two-thirds of all jobs will require some college by 2018, according to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.³ For youth in care with limited resources, work experience, and skills, obtaining a college degree is a sure way for youth to obtain employment with living wages and achieve self-sufficiency.

Making College Success a Reality

For the past two years the state has devoted resources to supporting foster youth in obtaining a college degree. Now is the time to redouble our commitment to the foster youth under our care. New York State has an obligation to ensure that youth in the foster care system can transition to independence, and a college degree is critical in that transition. Therefore, to continue to support this transition, we urge the state to take the next steps:

1. ***Develop a sustainable funding strategy for FYCSI:*** While we are thrilled that initial progress has been made to improve the educational outcomes for youth in the foster care system, we request that funding for FYCSI become a part of the governor's policy and budget priorities for the FY2018 state budget. New York State has an obligation to ensure that youth in foster care can make the transition to independence and a college degree is critical in that transition. Currently, the initiative is only able to serve a fraction of the students in need. TAP data from the 2015-16 academic year indicates that there were 1,819 current or former foster youth attending college full time⁴. However, the FYCSI program was only able to serve less than 19 percent of students in need of these supports. It is imperative that a long-term funding strategy and commitment to support

² Mehrotra, A., Treschan L. *Fostering Independence: The Need for a Statewide Foster Youth College Success Initiative*. May 2014. Community Service Society.

³ Carnevale, A.P., Smith, N., and Strohl, J. "Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018." June 2010. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

⁴ New York State Higher Education Services Corporation data accessed by foil request, December 2016.

FYCSI exist. This funding will allow for higher education institutions to plan ahead and design a more holistic program to support youth in foster care at college, including addressing their need for housing.

As such, we request that the state *allocate \$4.5 million to FYCSI in the final enacted FY18 state budget. This funding will be used to continue to support Cohorts 1 and 2 (students enrolled fall 2015 and fall 2016) at \$3 million and funding to add an additional cohort of first year students that would begin college in fall 2017 (Cohort 3) at \$1.5 million.* Foster youth already face many uncertainties in their life and removing those related to a college degree would help put these youth on a path to self-sufficiency.

- 2. *Develop a standardized identification mechanism for foster youth:*** Establishing an identification mechanism for foster youth during the application for admissions process is one of FYSA's top priorities for the year ahead. In order to continue to build upon the current progress made in the implementation of FYCSI during this year, it is imperative that we establish the infrastructure to remove the identification barriers for youth in care. FYSA believes that identifying potential students' needs is a three-pronged approach: 1) self-identification on the admission application; 2) MOU data sharing agreement between OCFS/SUNY/CUNY; and 3) campus-based linkages with community-based providers. *We recommend that the state mandate that institutions receiving FYCSI funding implement a standardized identification and verification process for students to be identified and have their eligibility verified for participation in FYCSI.*

To facilitate this, standardized language that allows foster youth to self-identify should be used on the CUNY and SUNY central admissions applications and HEOP participating independent college admissions applications. This language should be foster youth friendly, remove confusion (i.e. ward of the court, which is used on the federal financial aid application but is not standard language for NYS), and should indicate that there are additional aid and services available to this population. This will create consistency between the institutions and assist to remove confusion for foster youth who already experience tremendous obstacles during their transition to college. Additionally, the state should focus on developing an MOU information-sharing agreement that uses the self-identification and consent information captured in admission applications to allow for the Office of Children and Family Services to verify their foster care involvement. Additionally, by creating an identification mechanism, schools can better track outcomes and retention rates for youth in foster care. Having access to this data will better equip the state to develop interventions and programs to support their successful paths out of foster care.

Conclusion

Foster youth face so much uncertainty in their lives, having continuous support to obtain a college degree should not be an area of concern. The state cannot abandon its responsibility at such a critical time of transition. We must work together to ensure that all students already in the college pipeline can continue on. Additionally, funding must be expanded to allow the program to enroll a new cohort of students that will begin college this fall 2017. As such, the total funding allocation for FYCSI in the FY18 budget should be \$4.5 million. By doing so, that state will be ensuring that foster

youth, currently in the care of the state, will have a fighting chance at succeeding in college. By supporting the maintenance and expansion of FYCSI, the state is making a statement about its responsibility to foster youth. This statement is the commitment to ensure all foster youth will be supported to become independent adults and productive members of civic society. We know that if youth in foster care are provided opportunities to develop skills and access resources, they can and will succeed.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the 20,000 children and youth in foster care in New York State, and I welcome any questions regarding this submission.

