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Testimony Re: The Voluntary Extension of Care Program

House Oversight Committee

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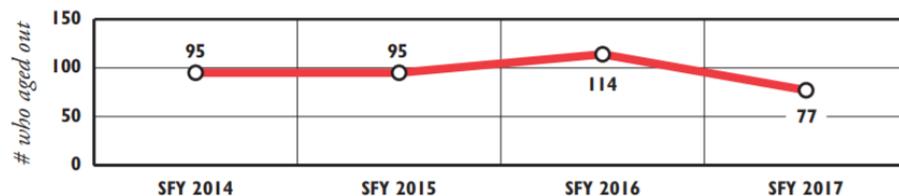
Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today.

Young people who exit foster care without permanency face significant challenges as they attempt to make the transition to adulthood on their own and fare poorly compared to other young people in the general population. Homelessness and unstable housing situations are particularly troubling outcomes for these young people. For these reasons, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supported the passage of Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) in 2018, extending services to DCYF youth from age 18 to age 21, and we continue to support implementation of the VEC program to ensure young people have access to a full array of tailored supports and services they need to be successful.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT continues to convene or participate in tables working on VEC implementation. A key component of implementation is consistent and continuous access to data on the population of youth who are aging out without permanency, in order to track trends, monitor and identify where programmatic improvements can be made. During the past several years, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT has received and reported annual data on the number of young people who age out of foster care at age 18. During the transition from the YESS program to the new VEC program, DCYF did not provide data for the total number of youth aging out of foster care in 2018. However, we have requested the data so that we can continue to monitor this population and DCYF has said that they will provide it to us.

Annual data on the number of young people who age out of foster care at age 18 shows the total universe of young people who may qualify for VEC and can be used to track and project the number of young people who decide to participate in the program.

Rhode Island Youth Aging Out of Foster Care, SFY 2014-2017



Source: Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, RICHIST 2014-2017.

The average number of youth aging out of foster care in Rhode Island has ranged from a high of 114 youth in SFY 2016 to a low of 77 in SFY 2017. As of May 14, 2019, 35 young people have entered VEC following approved court petitions.

We know that the Rhode Island housing market is tough, especially for our young people. Safe housing options can be expensive and limited in availability. We need more information on housing resources that are available and appropriate for this population and the ability to monitor the success or short-falls of housing options available.

Now that services are primarily internal to DCYF, we want to continue working with the Department on key parts of implementation including developing youth-centered policies and procedures, getting the word out about services to youth who are eligible, speeding up youth-centered communications with contact information for VEC staff, and ensuring young people are included since they know what works and what they need. It is critical that flexible resources are available in real time so that young people get the resources they need to be successful adults in the community.

It is critical that young people in the VEC program are supported in accessing higher education and high-level training opportunities to ensure they earn a high enough wage to successfully support themselves beyond age 21. For young parents, higher wages will support families and contribute to breaking the cycle of intergenerational involvement in the child welfare system.

The best way to ensure the success of VEC is through ongoing meaningful dialogue involving young people with lived experience, DCYF, the Family Court, and community-based child welfare professionals. When fully implemented it is our hope that VEC, as intended in the legislation that passed, will provide young adults with housing support, education and training opportunities, employment navigation, permanency support, adequate health and mental health supports, opportunities to contribute to their community, and an array of supportive relationships that will support their transition to adulthood. It is through comprehensive, tailored services that young people in VEC will achieve positive outcomes.

We thank you for your incredible support of young people involved in the child welfare system.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

