Testimony of Anita Weinberg
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning.

I have been working in the child welfare field for almost 40 years, as a social worker or lawyer.

I am testifying on behalf of the Civitas ChildLaw Center at Loyola University Chicago and the Coalition to Support the Future of Our Youth, a coalition of over 60 organizations that have signed on to the statement you received opposing Governor Rauner’s proposed cuts to human services, including eliminating all services for youth ages 18 – 21 who are in the care of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

Laurence Steinberg, a psychologist and researcher at Temple University, described the adolescent brain as “incredibly plastic,” meaning it is still being shaped. This offers tremendous opportunity to use positive experiences to inform development. It also means, however, that young people are at high risk of being affected disproportionately by negative experiences and lack of support and guidance.

Steinberg’s explanation reflects everything we have been learning about adolescent brain development. In recent years there has been a groundswell of research supporting this recognition.

Over the last few weeks, the Governor and the Director of the Department of Children and Family Services have been stating that it is the core mission of the Department to protect the “most vulnerable,” the youngest. In fact, these youth – 18 – 21 years old – are as vulnerable a group, as are their children (to keep them out of care). They are vulnerable because of what they have experienced over their lifetimes:

- The abuse or neglect that usually led to their removal from their homes;
- The trauma of separation from their family – parents, siblings, friends, community;
- Then the disruptions once in placement: moves from foster home to foster home to group home, transitional living placement, independent living apartments, all of which can result in changing schools, leaving behind friends, caseworkers, family, support systems;
- Continual loss and struggles with trust.

And now the Governor is considering abandoning this vulnerable group to an adult system that also is being threatened with severe cuts to the human services – cuts in homeless prevention services, drug abuse prevention, pregnant and parenting teen programs, access to affordable education and
job training – everything that can support positive opportunities – which Steinberg tells us shapes adolescent development.

DCFS publishes a checklist for youth in care, titled “The Emancipation Decision: Are You Ready?” The list identifies the following questions a youth should ask him- or herself - before deciding to become emancipated:

- Do you have a job?
- Do you have adequate financial resources?
- Do you have a stable place to live?
- Do you have access to medical care?
- Do you have access to educational resources?
- Do you have a support system?
- Do you have sufficient day care resources if required?

With the proposed cuts, how will DCFS ensure that the youth aging out of the child welfare system at age 18 can answer these questions sufficiently?

In his testimony, Director Sheldon has stated that in a perfect world, we would support 18-21 year olds, but that this is not a perfect world and we have to figure out how to transition youth who are now 18 as though they were 21.

This is artificial logic and misunderstands adolescent development. You cannot pretend an 18 year old is a 21 year old.

The Director has stated that federal dollars could be available for some youth if they are working, in school, or in job training, or unable to participate in these activities because of a disability. He has suggested that the option of remaining in care should serve as an incentive to meet one of these criteria. He’s also noted that only 36% of youth in care ages 18 – 21 currently meet these criteria.

What we don’t know is:

- Where are these youth currently?
- How are they spending their time?
- Why aren’t they in school, job training, work?

Aren’t we the ones who have failed them? If DCFS seeks to cut off those youth who do not meet these criteria, then the “deal” should be that no programs will be eliminated – or youth put out on the street – until the Department takes a snapshot of who is/ is not eligible and why, and then the providers sufficiently prepare youth for independence. Too many youth are being lost. If almost 70% of the 18-21 year olds in DCFS care do not meet the federal criteria for matching funds, per Director Sheldon’s report, aren’t we the ones failing the young people in care?
If you cut those not meeting the federal matching criteria, it is likely the most traumatized youth who will be cut because they have the least ability to meet the requirements of work, school, and training. We are then forcing out onto the street those in the most imminent danger — those who have not learned how to manage the system, maneuver, handle challenges appropriately.

This is a false savings of dollars. Enormous costs will be imposed by forcing these youth out and struggling to become part of the general population — costs to address homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse, pregnancy, and criminal behaviors.

We have the opportunity to work with members of the Statewide Youth Advisory Board to DCFS — 15 – 21 year olds. We work with them on policy advocacy. They are a remarkable, mature group of young adults. But they also are extremely vulnerable — and feel vulnerable — and fear these proposed cuts, not only for themselves, but even more for the youth who are still struggling.

Ending essential supports for this population of young people is morally unconscionable and fiscally irresponsible. I urge you to remember Steinberg’s research, use the years 18 – 21 to provide positive experiences — not expose them to negative ones.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.