Hello. My name is Tyshiana Jackson. I am the DCFS Statewide Youth Advisory Board (SYAB) President and the Central Region President. The SYAB is comprised of current and former youth in care between 14 and 21 years of age. We are advocates on behalf of the 17,000 youth in care and are represented in every region across the state. As our mission states, we are committed to youth empowerment, development, leadership, and achievement for each youth across the State of Illinois. I am here today representing the Statewide Youth Advisory Board and as an opponent to the proposed DCFS budget cuts. There has been a lot of discussion over the past month concerning these cuts and this is what I've been hearing.

We oppose these cuts for many reasons. First, a lot of these youth haven't finished high school. They're struggling with all of their life experiences. The state does not have adequate trauma training or staff in facilities that are able to provide youth with the proper treatment.

Secondly, youth will be left out on the streets to fend for themselves. That presents us with another problem. Youth becoming homeless. I am aware of the fact that youth would find a way to solve it but they may not find safe places to live. Youth need to be able to afford rent, a security deposit, food, utilities, a bank account, and credit history in order to live sustainably. What youth experience in DCFS care is not a normal upbringing and that makes it that much harder for youth to learn how to be independent. Until the point of emancipation the Department has outlined everything for them by creating rules and restrictions that every youth must follow. How can we set youth out into a world that is unknown to them thanks to their overbearing parent?

If youth are no longer funded by the Department we will see high increases of numbers of incidents that other departments of the state will be involved in carrying the burden. For example, Department of Corrections (DOC) is likely to see an increase in the number of inmates. I strongly believe this theory simply because the Department will be able to provide something that others really can’t. An inmate is provided with food, clothing, and shelter. Who wouldn’t want that? It may not be the most ideal situation but at least its stable housing but do we really want to see Illinois's children become unsuccessful by developing a record?

Youth are also likely to commit crimes because they have no other way of getting the things they need like food, shelter, and clothing. They won't be able to afford school. Because of the current economic state of Illinois a job will be really hard to find. There is one major illegal industry that is far more successful than any most legal entities; drug
dealing. Yes it is definitely an illegal industry but it is also an easy money maker. More importantly, it's a straightway to jail. Now we have an issue on our hands and there will not only be a spike in our crime rate but that would mean more funds for the DOC and a greater strain on the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Youth newly released from the Department of Juvenile Justice are placed into DCFS and DHS housing facilities because their current environment is deemed unsafe for their return. Where will they turn to? Chances are that if they are released at 18 then they will end up right back where they started meaning that there was no point of attempting to hand them a "better life" if their chances at it are cut off too early.

Education is another huge concern. The Statewide YAB drafted a bill that was passed by the 98th General Assembly. This bill raised the number of scholarships given from a maximum of 48 to a minimum of 53. Also, youth are given five years instead of four as previously listed. This Public Act and all $1.2 million will be cut from the budget if this proposal is passed. From what I've learned in my time of serving on the YAB, hundreds of youth do dream of going to college and apply for this scholarship. Without this scholarship it will be really hard for youth to achieve their dreams.

Would you abandon your own children when they are 18 years old with no place to call home? Were you ready for that at 18? What if your parents abandoned you? Could you survive?
House Appropriations – Human Services Committee  
Subject Matter Hearing on Proposed DCFS Budget Cuts  
March 26, 2015  
Testimony by Carlos Rodriguez

Good Morning,

My name is Carlos O. Rodriguez; I am 19 years old. I am the Executive Team Leader for the Cook Regional Youth Advisory Board (RYAB), a member of the IDCFS Statewide Youth Advisory Board (SYAB), and the President of the Lawrence Hall Youth Advisory Council (YAC) for the Older Adolescent Program (OAP). I successfully went through a residential program, am now living in a transitional living program, and working towards independent living options.

I sit before you today asking you to consider what is really being done with these budget cuts. We have enough issues in the child welfare system with the mistreatment in the residential homes. These budget cuts are just adding more problems to this system. The budget cuts will take away programs that have assisted youth in staying out of trouble and keeping them on track.

Think about the youth who have taken advantage of the DCFS Scholarship or Youth in College Program to further their education. Without that, where would they be? Or what about programs that assist youth finding employment, such as Mentoring Youth To Inspire Meaningful Employment (MyTime). This is a program that successfully assisted me in finding employment. I currently work at a place called ShipBob organizing orders that come in, finding the order ID and pairing it with the item it goes with. Point being, without the assistance of this program, I'd probably still be struggling to find employment.

The Transitional Living Program I am involved with made it possible for me to find employment and have a place to stay. Ben Ojci, my mentor at MyTime, assisted me in finding employment while I worked towards completing everything I need to get approved for an independent living option. During that time, I was building life skills that I need to be a successful independent adult, such as buying my own groceries, cooking for myself, and budgeting my own money.

This would be close to impossible if I was alone at 18.
That isn't necessarily my issue; I'm just looking out for the next person who may be in that situation. And there are many youth in this situation. It is a serious concern of mine because I care about all my fellow youth in care who may not have anywhere to go. I feel that it may possibly add to the already outrageous homeless population of youth who have unsuccessfully aged out without a plan.

Another problem that I have is the budget cut to the program Youth Reach. This is a problem for me because Youth Reach funds two programs that I have participated in that prevented me from being on the streets: The programs being the Cicero Boys' Club and Corazón.

I started going to the Cicero Boys' Club when I was eight years old and continued going there until I was 15 when I moved back to Chicago. Going to the Boys' Club helped me so much because I used to be very shy and socially awkward. In elementary school, I didn't have any friends and I didn't speak to anyone. Going to this program helped me be more social and gain leadership skills through becoming a youth leader.

Being a youth leader meant I had to be a positive role model for the younger kids. Going to Corazón I had a very similar experience. Both programs prevented me from getting involved with gangs and drugs. Being a socially awkward young boy, I would have done anything to be accepted and have people who called me their friend. I suffered from very low self-esteem and did not know my own worth. But now that I've matured into a young man and gained confidence and leadership skills, I know I don't need anybody's approval but my own. I probably wouldn't have learned that on my own though because of how shy I was. I would not be as successful as I am today were it not for these programs that have helped me mature into the outgoing adolescent I am today.

This has continued even today with the Statewide Youth Advisory Board, which targets youth between ages 14 to 21, and also programs like Success by 25 and Struggling Youth Equals Successful Adults, which targets youth between ages 17 to 21.

This is the same population we are discussing whether to cut funding for. All the skills that I have gained over the last 11 years are finally blossoming for me, but even I realize that I need more time to develop these skills.
Testimony before the House Appropriations Committee – Human Services
Concerning Proposed Budget Cuts to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

Chicago, Illinois
April 1, 2015

Good morning, my name is Jermall Adams. I am a 19 year-old youth in care living in a transitional living program (TLP) program. I am President of Northern Region of the DCFS Statewide Youth Advisory Board. I am concerned about the proposed budget cuts to DCFS regarding 18 to 21 year olds.

Being in DCFS at the age of 18 has helped me by providing me with the independence skills that I need to know in the real world. For example, I had no bank account, no job, no high school Diploma, which equals no money and not ready to be independent. With the guidance of DCFS and my TLP, I now have a bank account; I have a job; I have a high school diploma; and most importantly, I am more ready for independent living now than I was a year ago. Another thing that had helped me as a DCFS youth is Struggling Youth Equals Successful Adults or SYESA. If it wasn't for SYESA, I wouldn't have the support system that I have today.

SYESA has helped me become more responsible and helped me develop better public speaking skills. They have also helped me stay on track with school at a point of time. Another factor that has helped me at the age of 18 is the DCFS Youth Advisory Board. The Youth Advisory Board has helped me become a more professional and positive individual. The Youth Advisory Board has also helped me be a better person today I was back then. Before I joined the Youth Advisory Board, I was going on run, trusted no one, and was very reluctant to do anything, and I felt very hopeless. Because of the Youth Advisory Board, I stand here today with hope, able to trust and I don't run anymore. But most importantly, I stand here today as a positive role model that advocates educates and empower over 15,000 youth in care.

If I was out of DCFS at the age of 18 I don't know where I would be. I would be either homeless, or in jail or just simply dead from going on run. I want to close this testimony with this message. We, as youth in care, have already had a tragic past and not knowing our family is bad enough. And now, cutting funding for youth in care 18 to 21 will add another thing to the list of things for the youth to stress even more about. Most people wouldn't kick their children out of their house at the age of 18, then why is the state of Illinois willing to do it to an unstable youth like me? We deserve the best chance to succeed and keeping emancipation age at 21 is the best way to support youth in care.

Thank you for this time to speak.
House Appropriations Committee -- Human Services
Chicago, Illinois

April 1, 2015

My name is Iesha Faye Rankin. I am 22 years old and a former youth in care. I first entered into foster care when I was six years old. From age ten to seventeen I reunited with my family and lived with my aunt. Although my aunt didn’t take best care of me, I was reentered into care when my aunt had a stroke when I was seventeen. Benefited from the independent living program fro age eighteen to twenty one. Age eighteen I have endured every type of abuse and maltreatment imaginable. Although I never used recreational drugs, I have no children, have no felony, at age eighteen I was still a high school dropout, no job, no communication skills, no people skills, no idea how to form relationships, no sense of direction, and no sense that anyone cared about me. I suffered from depression and anxiety that was never treated. Not only did staying a ward of the state give me security that I won’t be homeless, but it mentally changed my life.

I met staff who talked and encouraged me to attend a dcf youth advisory board. I continued to meet with staff and youth who gave me hope. I learned communication skills. I learned how to public speak. I learned how to express myself in a mature way. I learned how to communicate my needs wants and desires. For the first time I really felt a sense of importance. I probably would be dead from suicide or permanently hospitalized from having a mental breakdown like my mother if I did come across the people I met through dcf after I turned eighteen. I later became an officer for Cook County and continued to make meetings such as this one, plan comities, actives, and graduations for youth in care. The people that I met; rather staff or youth become the people I love and continue to have a relationship with till this day. Most of the people in my life are associated with dcf. People I met between the ages of eighteen and twenty one. I even met the person who understands me better than I understand myself; my current falence who was also a ward of state.

I’m not saying every youth is take advantages of the resources dcf offered me. I am saying instead of illuminating them all together, invest in ways to mentally help youth who have been abandon, sexually abused, and physically beaten to become successful adults despite their tragic childhood. Giving an adolescent or young adult a place to stay is not enough. Just like any other young adult, they I mean we need guidence also. I got guidence because I asked for it. And I am still getting guidence. But it should not be a choice. Anyone who suffer from a tragedy need council, just like a broken bone need a cast. Physical pain heals, but extreme mental pain will never heal if not treated properly. By taking away the resources completely for youth in care at age eighteen results to more violence, money going towards building jails, hiring more police, building rehabs, building commentaries, and homeless shelters. Because eighteen and nineteen year olds who have a terrible childhood will do whatever they can do to survive in the streets. In the end the state of Illinois will spend more money maintaining troubled youth instead helping them.

I’m sure many of you are parents who have young adults who still live with you. To guide them until they are probably in their mid-twenties after they have plenty of money saved up with a college degree and a promising career. Would you kick them your house at age eighteen because they are legally grown? How would you feel you were kicked out the house at age eighteen? How much harder do you believe your life would be? Do you think you would have the career you have? Or would be in this room to help make decisions that effects lives of over 15000 youth in Illinois that you probably don’t know personally. Now imagine you got kicked out at eighteen with a tragic history behind you...
Dear Bruce Rauner,

Hello my names is Fransua Gradiz, you may not know me and I do not know you but I wanted to write a letter to you in regards to your decision on cutting on some budget and one of those organizations happens to be DCFS which I have been a part of for 7 years. I just wanted to let you in on a little secret about this organization. I do not go against anything you are saying in regards to making the job employment go up instead of the unemployment increasing, in regards to ensuring that there is a good economic growth. But have yu taken into consideration as to how rude in my opinion it would be to cut the budget to help foster kids up until 18 and then from there on after they should be able to figure it out on themselves don’t you think thats a bit cruel? I mean yes in the U.S once you reach the age of 18 you are considered an adult but thats just a label. Most of these kids in foster care won’t be ready by the age of 18 to be on their own. why? simply because not everyone’s brain mature at the same time. If kids that are 18 still trying to get over the past and are beginning a new life and are seeing that their is hope for them because DCFS is providing them with the necessary help to get them over what has caused them to become a child of the ward.

Furthermore, DCFS makes sure that a child/ youth gets all the services he may need to continue on with his life and to finally make his life after they are 21. If you stop helping youth once they have reached the age of 18 they will not know how to go about doing certain things in life. The reason being is that in their early childhood hey suffered a lot and what they are trying to do now is get over the past and receive all the services that are provided in order for the youth to become successful. In my personal experience dcfs has helped me a lot to overcome my past by taking some therapy sessions at chatholic charities, they provided me with a mentor. Once I had reached 19 dcfs gave me the best news ever I had received my resident card and that made me happy and gave me faith to keep moving forward with my life because even though I lived a harsh life thanks to dcfs I was able to be the first in my family to go to a four year university. As, I arrived to SIUC on August 2013, I was also notified about another program that helps youth be able to get their bachelors degree. How? well the youth in college program helps pay for any college expenses which FAFSA will not cover and it gives youths a stipend while they are studying and getting ready to become successful adults once graduating. Once I was about turn 21 this year, my caseworker introduced me to the ILO program. What the ILO program is, is a program in which a youth whom is of age 18 and 21 are eligible, basically the agency helps the youth find an apartment suitable for the youth, and they help the youth pay the rent until the youth has emancipated which is at age 21, after that the youth is responsible for all rent etc. Yes, it may seem as if the govt. is giving them a way of luxury but to me it is a program that helps a youth become an adult and learn that there are certain sacrifices he/she will have to make in order to achieve their goals, by becoming an adult he/she will understand that they must know how to plan a budget, know what to do if you have no money and cant buy clothing or food, all these services or things in life that an adult should know the ILO program provides that help for
the youth and shows them where to go for certain services if they are ever in trouble or need help. This program is one that is connected with dcf’s so by cutting the budget to 18 you are not really helping kids or youth out you are not giving them hope to see that they can go to college. There is another great program that dcf’s puts the youth in which is the SYSE program, this program is amazing because a youth learns about budgeting, life skills, and ways in which you can invest and save, as well as a youth can be put with a life coach to guide the youth. This to me is amazing because as a youth I have someone think carefully about my options and also see what is best for me, the life coach teaches you how to be responsible and making sure you are organized, but at the same time connected with people in order to get your word heard and to get help.

All In all, I believe that by reducing the budget for kids after they turn 18 will affect not only the youth but then those other programs wont be able to give back to the community to help out those youth in need of help. Reconsider your decision because if you or as other political officials say that you want to see a better future well I do not think that will be possible if you cut down these youth from the help they should be getting in order to reach their goals in life. Also, I and all other youths who have come before me will not be able to pass down that guidance, skills, and experience in order for our VOICES to be heard and for youth to be save and helped for a better future and an economy if that is what you want because youth(students) are the ones who make universities/colleges rich so without them what would happen to education. Well I hope that we get to talk or meet it would be really awesome to talk to you more in depth so that you can see that because of all the help dcf’s provides to youth we are able keep moving forward with our lifes and show you all that we have accomplished because of them. Thank you and hope you have a wonderful day.

Sincerely,
Fransua Gradiz
March 26, 2015

To whom it may concern,

My name is Tieanna Walker and I am a former youth who emancipated January 1, 2015. I am one of the fortunate youth who was able to be independent and utilize DCFS along with DHS benefits without any regret. I am a student and an employee at Harold Washington and full time mother with more goals than the average. The purpose of this letter is not fully about me. In fact, it is a letter full of gratitude instead. Even though I am not in the system anymore I am still able to maintain my ILO apartment and get full support with Youth in College, DHS, and child care. Youth in college has helped me tremendously because it helps with rent expenses which is ($800) and helps with child care expenses (considering the budget was cut). I am grateful to have SNAP benefits because it helps with managing food in the house along with medical benefits for both me and my child. However, if it wasn’t for SNAP benefits and YIC I would not be able to manage rent, a child, and household expenses with a minimum wage paying job. One thing that I can say is just because you turn 21 years old physically does not mean you are an adult mentally but I learned to be humble and strive for my goals regardless of the struggle. But utilizing these benefits has took a weight off of my shoulders and I am working to be on my own without these benefits at all. Furthermore, I am grateful because I am more fortunate than most and would recommend for any youth to utilize these benefits to the best of their ability.

Thank You,

Tieanna Walker