

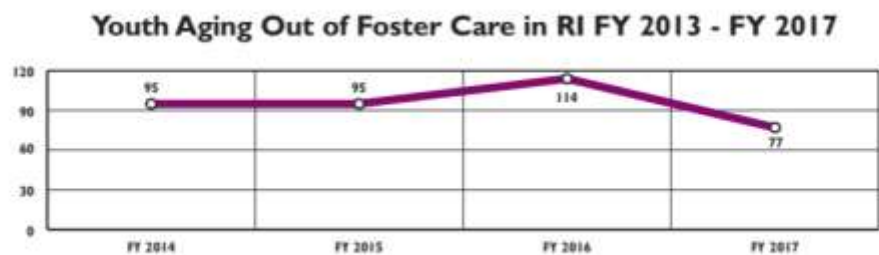


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**Testimony Re: S2022 The Young Adult Voluntary Extension of Care Act
Senate Judiciary Committee
February 1, 2018
Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director**

Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Thank you to Senator DiPalma for sponsoring this bill and to the cosponsors: Senator Goldin, Senator Miller, Senator Goodwin, and Senator Lynch Prata. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for Senate Bill 2022. The Young Adult Voluntary Extension of Care Program would extend the age of foster care from age 18 to age 21 and would provide a range of tailored programs and services to ensure successful transitions to adulthood for youth in the care of the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF). This bill would reverse the decision made in 2007 to roll the age back to age 18.

Young people who exit foster care without permanency face significant challenges as they attempt to make the transition to adulthood on their own and fair poorly compared to other young people in the general population. Homelessness and unstable housing situations are particularly troubling outcomes for these young people.



Source: Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, RICHIST 2013-2017. Note: numbers reflect State Fiscal Year.

The average number of youth aging out of foster care in Rhode Island has ranged from a high of 114 youth in FY 2016 to a low of 77 in FY 2017.

The 2007 legislative change lowering the upper age limit of foster care from 21 to 18, required DCYF to retain youth with serious emotional disturbances, autism, or a functional developmental and have their cases managed by DCYF, remaining legally entitled to services through age 21. A recent positive development was the decision by DCYF to permit youth who are still in school to remain in DCYF care past the age of 18.

Extending the age of foster care to age 21 has significant momentum in the United States as being a wise and cost-effective policy choice. *The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008* provided states the option to use federal Title IV-E funds to expand foster care services from age 18 to 21 for youth unable to find a permanent family before reaching the age of majority. As of 2017, a total of 25 states are extending foster care after age 18 with federal financial support using Title IV-E funds. This bill is written to enable the state to maximize the use of federal Title IV-E dollars.

There is ample research that demonstrates the cost effectiveness of changing the age back to age 21. According to the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, young people who remained in foster care until age 21 had better outcomes than those who left care at age 18. Young adults who remained in care were twice as likely to be working or in school at age 19, were twice as likely to have completed at least one year of college by age 21, and were more likely to utilize independent living services. Young women remaining in care experienced a 38% reduction in pregnancy before the age of 20.

Research indicates that extended foster care is associated with lower societal costs and increased financial benefits for young people transitioning from foster care into the community. Extending foster care for young people to age 21 doubles the percentage who earn a college degree which in turn increases their earning potential. Research on the adolescent brain indicates that providing young people additional services through extension of foster care and providing the same or similar skills and assistance that children in intact families receive will achieve better results entering adulthood.

As noted, this bill calls for a voluntary extended care program. Young people will make the decision to remain in foster care beyond age 18 only if the services, placement settings, and judicial oversight offered to them adequately meet their unique needs. We are encouraged by the leadership of DCYF and Family Court who have closely collaborated on this bill to ensure a successful approach. The bill requires a permanency plan that addresses housing assistance to obtain supervised independent living arrangements, shared living arrangements or extended foster and kinship care; education, vocational assessment, job training and employment plan needed to transition the young adult to self-sufficiency; assisting the young adult in obtaining educational goals, a job, and employment/vocational skills; any other services and supports that will assist the young adult in accessing available services; applying for public benefits; acquiring important documents, such as ID card, driver's license, birth certificate, social security card, health insurance cards, and medical records; attending to physical and mental health needs; maintaining relationships with individuals who are important to them and acquiring information about siblings and other maternal and paternal relatives.

The expertise of DCYF, the Family Court, community-based child welfare professionals, and the involvement of young people in foster care themselves are critical to the effective implementation of the law. When fully implemented it is our hope that the Voluntary Extension of Care Program will provide young adults with family supports, education and training

opportunities, employment navigation, opportunities to contribute to their community, adequate health and mental health supports, and an array of supportive relationships that will enhance their transition to adulthood.

Passing Senate Bill 2022 will provide an entitlement of services to age 21. The tailored services described in the bill will support young adults to successfully transition to adulthood. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports passage of this legislation and we thank you for your incredible leadership on this critical issue.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.