

Harris County Protective Services for Children and Adults

Testimony on HB 45

House Human Services Committee

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Chair Frank and members of the Committee. I am Joel Levine, Executive Director of Harris County Protective Services for Children and Adults. Harris County Protective Services for Children and Adults (HCPS) was created in 1966 as a County Child Welfare Board with one purpose and has expanded over the past fifty-two years into a county department with more than a dozen programs serving children and families involved in the state child protective services system, youth at-risk and vulnerable adults. I am writing to highlight how HCPS partners with DFPS to provide transition services for youth and young adults aging out the state foster care system and former foster youth.

Houston Alumni and Youth (HAY) Center:

The HAY Center provides one stop transitional services for current and former foster youth ages 16-25 with an emphasis on education, employment and housing resources. The HAY Center was setup by HCPS as a public-private partnership with the community. HCPS administers the Center which receives state funding through the DFPS PAL Aftercare Room and Board and Life Skills Training Contracts and the Texas Workforce Commission for employment support, county general funds and private foundation dollars and corporate and individual giving through the HAY Center Foundation, a private non-profit group established in 2015 to support the youth and young adults that receive services at the Center with resources that the state and county are unable to provide. Services include housing programs, employment opportunities, including our successful annual summer employment program for youth in care with a network of local businesses, parenting classes, educational services, college tours, and a host of other activities to help youth with their transition to adulthood.

The Center works to develop and implement programs based on the expressed needs of the youth and young adults served who are instrumental in the Center's governance. Based on formal and informal surveys and focus groups we learned that the main concern youth have as they age out is around housing, in terms of where are they going to live, and the need for relational permanency in terms of a caring adult in their life who is not paid to care about them. With this in mind the Center has established the Transition Coach and the Bridge Housing Programs.

Essentially we recruit and train volunteers that are matched with a youth to help them navigate their own course to adulthood. It looks different for every youth and this person is with them

along the journey. Whether it's applying for college, finding a job, finding an apartment or figuring out healthy lifestyles. The coach is there for them. We have plenty of success stories and we have an evaluation underway with the University of Houston Graduate College Of Social Work.

The staff at the HAY Center report that foster youth that participate in life skills classes and other services at the Center while still in care live with anxiety and uncertainty about where they will live after exiting care. To address this issue the HAY Center Foundation provided initial funding to start a bridge housing program at a local apartment complex in December of 2017. The Center will lease up to 25 apartment units and one additional apartment for the office for the case manager and group meetings and events. This program is innovative because it does not have a lot of the requirements that restrict residents – it's more accommodating for youth we serve.

The development of a comprehensive continuum of housing and supports designed to guide youth aging out of care in the achievement of their educational and occupational goals, while developing a system of natural supports in the community is needed. The Bridge Housing Program followed by support through Housing vouchers through a collaboration with the Houston Housing Authority can address the middle and back end of the Housing continuum for youth aging out. However, there are many youth, such as those aging out of RTC's, who need more structure and support than moving immediately to their own apartment in a private complex can provide. What is missing is the front end of this continuum. More dedicated resources to prepare youth for housing while still in care could include a start followed by a structured SRO or similar facility with intensive on site twenty-four hour wrap around support.

The HAY Center is an example of the partnership between DFPS and HCPS to meet the needs of children, youth and families in Harris County. The partnership has enabled the state and county to facilitate collaborative problem-solving and promote resource development from county, state, city, and private sources.

What's happening in Harris Co is true public/private partnership and I hope that other counties will see the value of local collaboration and investment. And, we hope that the State recognizes the need for ongoing support which will further innovative programs, incorporation of best practices and more partnerships.

Thank you for your focus on transition age youth.

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