

Human Services Hearing

My name is Cindy Sparacino. I am the Transitional Living Director at Angel Reach. We are a program in Conroe, TX that houses and provides extensive services to young adults who have aged out of the foster system. Aside from stable housing, food and clothing, we offer counseling services, case management, employment and education assistance, transportation and help getting a driver's license and a car. The clientele we serve are not in extended care, but as I stated, have aged out of the system. We are a member of TNOYS and a United Way agency.

I am here today to speak on behalf of the vulnerable young people whom we serve. What our agency sees on a regular basis are young adults who come to us completely and totally unprepared for independent living. Some come to us directly from care, with very little knowledge about how to navigate adulthood. Many come to us after spending months on the streets, in the woods or in shelters. They learn about our agency through other agencies or from the homeless community. In fact, 50% of aged out foster kids in Texas find themselves homeless within a year of aging out of the system.

My hope today is to give you a glimpse into the lives of our young people who I believe can be better prepared for adulthood long before leaving foster care.

I'd like to share with you the story of Karen. Her drug addicted mother dropped her off at a CPS office in Houston when she was 6 years old. She grew up in at least 10 different homes and shelters, finally landing in a Residential Treatment Center when she was 15. She endured a great deal of abuse in this RTC, but she had already been sexually assaulted at her last placement, so she expected nothing different in this new group home. Labeled a behavior problem due to anger issues, she was soon prescribed Xanax and Zoloft. Never did she receive psychotherapy to help her resolve her anger issues or the trauma she endured in her various placements. It's simply easier to medicate these young people because it is easier to control these unwanted behaviors. When Karen turned 16, she attended classes through the PAL program (Preparation for Adult Living). She remembers being taught job readiness skills and financial management skills, but at age 16 she lost most of that knowledge over the course of the next year. This is nothing against PAL workers, in fact they are some of the hardest working people in the state. However, they each have on average 127 young adults on their case load. I think it's fair to say there's no way they can be totally effective.

Karen turned 18 years old during the month of September – her senior year in high school. She was eager to leave the RTC where she experienced so much abuse, so upon aging out she began to couch surf. She eventually found herself at a friend's aunt's house with no way to get to her high school. Having no one to advise her, she quit school and was eventually asked to leave her friend's aunt's house. She eventually connected with the homeless community in

Conroe. A friend told her about Angel Reach and the fact that we feed the homeless and offer different services. Karen came to Angel Reach where she enrolled in our program. She connected with one of our counselors where she began to address the trauma she endured and began to learn healthy coping skills. She was re-evaluated by a psychiatrist and her medication was eventually modified. Karen worked hard with our tutors and ultimately received her GED. While living with us, she enrolled in Lone Star College, where she received her CNA license. She also learned to drive with us and soon received her driver's license. Karen has many more goals and now sees her true potential.

There are so many things that we should be doing to better transition these young people out of the system. Had Karen heard about our program or other programs like ours, she could have been smoothly transitioned into a safe place to live upon turning 18.

Here are some suggested solutions.

- First, their mental health needs MUST be addressed in a real way earlier than they are, in order to reduce the trauma they all experience when transitioning out of care. Their coping skills as well as their emotional regulation skills must be developed.
- It is imperative that a safe and secure living arrangement is secured long before these guys turn 18. They need to know where they're going and what is expected of them when they get there.
- They need their personal documentation: like a state issued ID or preferably a driver's license, and at least their birth certificate and SS card.
- Basic life skills, financial awareness, job readiness – all of these are taught in their PAL classes at 16. But, it needs to be ongoing. At the very least, they need to wait a little while so that it can be fresh on their minds.

We at Angel Reach see every day the consequences of all of these skills NOT being taught and needs NOT being met. These young people deserve better.

Finally, I would like to share with you some statistics for the state of Texas. As I said earlier, 50% of our aged out youth are homeless within a year. 26% are incarcerated. 55% are seriously addicted to drugs, 67% of young women have a child, and 70% of the children born to aged-out young mothers will also end up in foster care.

Thank you for your time and thank you for hearing me