

**Testimony to Chairman Raymond and the House Human Services Committee
for HB 445**

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I am here to testify to support HB 445. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

For over 14 years, I was the Director of residential programs at Lifeworks (here in Austin) that provide shelter and other services for youth in the foster care system. I engaged over 5,000 youth during my service for Lifeworks, most of them in the later teen years. If I had to draw some generalizations, I would say these young people had surprising drive for a better future, but at the same time didn't have attachments to adults and normal community engagements to help them figure out how to get where they wanted to go.

Those of us who work with young people in foster care and other challenging situations see the effects of trauma, which people are beginning to gaining a greater understanding of. Other challenges for many youth in foster care are separation and attachment issues. I met thousands of young people who had been to 20, 30, even 40 schools since they entered care. I wonder if those of us who have found some success in our lives can imagine our journey if it had included 40 different homes and 40 different schools. I believe any opportunity that gives this population a chance for stability, connection, and opportunity similar to other youth in Texas is worthy of our attention and support.

IDA programs have shown early success for youth in foster care in several states. This model has also been used with other populations here in Texas. For example, an IDA program for TANF families in San Antonio allowed over 200 families to purchase homes, 50 to start small businesses, and helped over 500 people to attend college. In Michigan, a youth in an IDA program started a DJ business and is very successful, another was able to buy a device that helped him read in spite of his dyslexia, and he found success in college. Several youth in Washington, partnering with the YMCA have bought cars, and have stated they have become much more careful about how they spend money.

There is federal legislation in the works that would make an IDA program for youth in foster care mandatory nationally. It would be good for us to start laying the groundwork. I have spoken to US Representative Jim Langervin's office in Washington DC, and they plan to introduce federal legislation in the next month.

Many of the youth I worked with would utilize financial outlets such as pawn shops, check cashing services, and other entities that had exorbitant fees and interest rates. Few saw themselves as potential homeowners or business owners. This program would increase youths' financial literacy and help them establish connections with banks, credit unions, and other valuable community resources. The bill would allow youth in foster care to make positive steps towards financial and personal stability.

A message I heard far too often with foster youth was an "I can't" one. "I can't find a job," "I can't graduate," "I can't get anyone to rent to me," etc. Making the experience of saving and doing business with regular institutions a common one increases the "I Can" voice. Early studies done by Casey Family programs show higher rates of employment, college success, home ownership, successful housing rental, etc. among foster youth who participate in an IDA program.

Thank you.