



**Children's Law Center**  
of Los Angeles

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY BEFORE THE UNITED STATES  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INCOME SECURITY AND FAMILY SUPPORT**

**May 15, 2007**

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## STATEMENT BEFORE THE HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE SUBCOMMITTEE ON INCOME SECURITY AND FAMILY SUPPORT

by Leslie Starr Heimov

Interim Co-Executive Director, Children's Law Center of Los Angeles  
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Children's Law Center of Los Angeles is a nonprofit public interest legal organization that serves as the "voice" for abused and neglected youth in the largest foster care system in the nation. The dedicated attorneys and staff at the Children's Law Center represent more than 22,000 children in Los Angeles County dependency court. We advocate day-by-day, child-by-child, and case-by-case on behalf of our young clients. We also learn from our experience with individual clients and use that knowledge to advocate for concrete solutions to problems and for broader system reforms.

We are heartened by the commitment shown by the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support to improving the lives of the more than half a million children living in the nation's foster care system. We hope to draw your attention especially to the areas of federal funding reforms, provision of adequate mental health services to children in foster care, and assistance to youth who age out of the foster care system without a permanent support system to rely upon.

**Financing:** Currently, Title IV-E, the largest source of federal child abuse prevention and treatment funds, can only be accessed once children are removed from their birth family and brought into the foster care system. We hope that Congress will create more flexible and reliable federal foster care funding this year that will better support fragile families and thus prevent the need for foster entirely for many children and move others more quickly into permanent, loving homes through reunification with their birth parents, adoption, or legal guardianship by relatives and others.

**Mental Health Services:** Mental health problems among foster children are associated with a lower likelihood of reunifying with birth families or adoption, longer stays in the foster care system, more moves while in care, and a high rate of entry into the delinquency system. Last year, Children's Law Center sponsored a first-ever Los Angeles Foster Youth Mental Health Summit that brought together mental health clinicians, social workers, foster parents, relative caregivers, advocates, community leaders, and youth to identify and develop concrete, workable solutions regarding provision of mental health services for nearly 30,000 abused and neglected children throughout Los Angeles County.

Key recommendations in the report growing out of the Mental Health Summit include ensuring timely and quality screenings and assessments, instituting early intervention and prevention programs, promoting evidence based practices, enhancing access to services, facilitating system collaboration and communication, and enhancing the voice of youth in this process. Consistent

themes centered on the need for better communication, collaboration, and oversight among the multiple systems charged with caring for abused and neglected children.

**Youth Aging Out of Foster Care.** While foster care numbers are declining, both the numbers and percentages of youth aging out of care on their own is increasing across the country. Foster care was intended to be a temporary solution, until families could get their lives back on track, but for many children it has become a long-term living arrangement.

Youth who leave foster care at about age 18 are often ill-prepared for living independently. They have no safety net, and too many will experience unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and even come into contact with the criminal justice system within the first two years of leaving foster care. We need to do more to ensure that youth entering foster care will find a permanent family to love, nurture, and protect them. For youth who leave foster care on their own, we need to provide more help with practical life skills including how to act in a job interview, help in obtaining a drivers license, and information about programs that can assist youth with housing needs and provide personal guidance in enrolling in a college or trade school.

**Conclusion and Recommendations.** There have been many valuable and productive recommendations for change, including extending foster care and Medicaid eligibility to age 21 for all youth; providing services under the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act to all youth who leave care, not just youth aging out; and fundamental reforms to the federal foster care financing system to improve permanency outcomes for children. The nonpartisan Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care made a series of practical recommendations in their 2003 report that thoroughly address many related issues.

It is up to Congress to take these accumulated recommendations to heart and undertake now to institute concrete reforms. Each day we delay, an average of nearly 1,500 children in the U.S. enter the foster care system, and 62 foster youth will age out of the system without having found a permanent, loving family. Our nation cannot afford to fail our most vulnerable children in this way.

