



Office of the Child Advocate

State of Rhode Island

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HOUSE COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY

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Thank you, Chair Craven and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to provide testimony today in strong support of House Bills 5260 and 5345 which will memorialize in statute the inclusion of justice involved youth in eligibility for the Voluntary Extension of Program. I would like to extend my thanks to Representatives Casimiro, Noret, Read, McEntee, Spears, Shanley, Morales, Donovan, and Speakman for sponsoring bills in support of our young people.

My name is Katelyn Medeiros, and I am the Child Advocate for the State of Rhode Island. I am the Director of the agency which serves as the oversight agency to DCYF. As the oversight agency, we monitor the case of each child and young adult open to the Department to protect their legal rights and to promote policies and practices which ensure that youth are safe, and that their physical, mental, medical, educational, emotional, and behavioral health needs are met. When concerns about a specific out-of-home placement are brought to the attention of the OCA, our staff determine the type of advocacy that may be needed and take appropriate steps to protect the child's safety and overall well-being.

Justice Involved Youth

For many youth in the foster care system, reaching age 18 marks the beginning of a difficult journey into adulthood, often without the necessary resources, support, or stability. These young people are often left without a safety net, placing them at higher risk of homelessness, reoffending, or struggling to navigate adult life on their own.

Extended foster care provides these youth with a critical period of stability and support, offering opportunities for continued education, workforce readiness programs, and access to mental health and trauma-informed services. Allowing justice-involved youth to remain in or enter the foster care system during this transition can significantly reduce the chances of recidivism and increase their likelihood of becoming successful, independent adults. Importantly, it gives them the chance to heal and thrive, something that every young person deserves.

Research has shown that extending foster care benefits to all young adults is especially crucial for those who have experienced involvement with the justice system. These individuals often need additional time and resources to overcome the barriers that stem from their earlier life experiences, including potential stigmatization, interrupted schooling, and difficulties in securing stable employment.

In 2018, the Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) Program was established to provide additional supports to young adults who otherwise would have exited the child welfare system at age 18. VEC supports youth through rental and cash assistance, case management, and caseworkers help young people navigate education, workforce development, housing, and develop overall life skills to support independence.

The intention of the VEC program was to support young people who do not achieve permanency prior to reaching age 18 in expanding life skills and developing their independence in preparation for reaching independence at age 21. We are happy to say that DCYF currently grants entry to the VEC program for justice involved youth who have a dependency

filed prior to age 18. Therefore, the OCA is prioritizing advocacy to include this population in the law to ensure this practice continues throughout potential leadership changes in the future.

Several states across the nation have already recognized the importance of allowing justice-involved youth to participate in extended foster care including California, New York, Illinois, and Michigan. These states are setting an example by providing these vulnerable young adults with the support and resources they need to succeed. Providing justice-involved youth with extended foster care is not only beneficial for the individuals but is also a prudent investment in the future of the community. By giving these youth a chance to build stability, work toward independence, and contribute positively to society, we are creating stronger, more resilient communities.

Expand Programming Beyond Age 21

Currently, participation in the VEC program ends at age 21. The Child Information Gateway and Children's Bureau Report on Extension of Foster Care Beyond Age 18 dated March 31, 2022, indicates that 48 states allow youth in out-of-home care at the age of 18 to extend their placement. Of those, five states extend foster care to age 22 or 23. Young adults who have experienced the child welfare system often have also experienced trauma, placement disruptions, and gaps in their education. At age 18, many young people are not ready for the responsibilities of complete independence and young people experiencing the child welfare system may need additional time to find independent stability. Extending the time young adults in care are able to access critical services that ensure housing and food, in combination with assistance with education and employment will yield more successful outcomes for this vulnerable population. Additionally, some young people are exiting foster care prior to graduating from a four-year university. Extending the age of programming would allow young adults to access these services throughout a four-year college program aiding in long-term future employment and higher wage earnings.

House Bill 5345 proposes that youth who reunify with their parents and the reunification is not successful, be able to access the VEC program. This is similar to the current statutory language enabling youth who are either adopted or enter into a legal guardianship with a subsidy to enter the VEC program if permanency was achieved on or after their 16th birthday. The current language provides DCYF the opportunity to review the request and attempt to address issues through the adoption assistance agreement by providing post adoptive or post guardianship support services. The OCA suggests amending the bill language to align with current statutory language to include youth who reunify on or after their 16th birthday providing a safety net for youth who may struggle following reunification. The OCA supports expanding access to the VEC program to youth who are reunified after age 16. Often, these youth may have experienced trauma, multiple out-of-home placements, and gaps in education during their time in care, which requires additional supports and services to ensure long-term success. Youth and young adults who continue to struggle with reunification would be provided the opportunity to participate in the VEC program to better prepare for adulthood and prevent intergenerational involvement in the system.

We know that more time in extended foster care yields positive outcomes for young people. A 2019 study by Chapin Hall indicates that outcomes are improved for youth with each year they spend in extended foster care to include increased total earnings, increased money in bank accounts, increased rate of employment, and reduces the chances of food insecurity. Additionally, a 2021 study by Chapin Hall found that the likelihood of enrolling in college increases by 5-12% for each year a young person spends in extended foster care. According to a study by Child Trends, youth in

extended care were 1.4 times more likely to be receiving educational aid, three times more likely to be enrolled in school, and three times less likely to be disconnected from work and school at age 21.

While we recognize this is a challenging time fiscally, Rhode Island can join the ranks of other states that have recognized the value of supporting these youth, providing them with an opportunity to thrive. It is not only the right thing to do but a critical investment in the future of our state. The OCA supports House Bills 5260 and 5345 to ensure our youth have the supports and services needed to enable a comprehensive transition to adulthood. We thank you for your continued support of children and families involved with the child welfare system in Rhode Island.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Katelyn Medeiros". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Katelyn Medeiros, Esq.
Acting Child Advocate