

SUPPORT**SB 685– Family Law – Information and Services for Foster Children and Former Foster Children**

Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

March 3, 2015

The National Center for Housing and Child Welfare (NCHCW) is dedicated to matching permanent housing resources with child welfare and community-based supportive services in order to ensure that no child lingers needlessly in foster care as a consequence of their family's inability to provide safe, decent, affordable housing. NCHCW is equally committed to ensuring that each young person who faces adulthood without the support of a permanent family has a solid plan for stable housing and services to support their successful transition to adulthood. Though NCHCW is a national organization, we are based in College Park, MD and we strongly support SB 685, which will reduce the incidence of homelessness among former foster youth in Maryland.

This thoughtful and timely legislation is closely aligned with the prevailing federal law governing public child welfare, the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351)*. Additionally, SB 685 capitalizes on the robust efforts at the state level led by the Department of Human Resources (DHR) to improve the overall economic, educational, and housing platform for youth transitioning out of foster care to adulthood by raising the expectations on the court system and other community partners that they fully support DHR's ongoing improvements.

Since 2007, Maryland has addressed the needs of youth transitioning into adulthood through the statewide **Ready By 21 (RB21)** initiative. More recently, DHR built upon the Maryland Children's Cabinet's broader Youth RB21 initiative (focusing on *all* youth 18-21) to serve as the **framework** for DHR's current **Transition Planning Services and Ready By 21 Initiative** (referred to throughout as RB21). DHR's objectives for RB21 align with the USICH Youth Framework, and the activities undertaken as part of RB21 address the **educational and employment** outcomes of youth; **financial stability** (through employment, entitlement benefits, established credit and basic identification documents); **health and well-being** (linkages to health care services); **permanent, supportive connections**; and **safe, affordable, stable housing**. RB21 is driven by the **Youth Engagement Model** of practice with core strategies including the utilization of **Youth Advisory Boards** and Transition Planning Family Involvement Meetings so that youth are active partners in the decision making process for their own futureⁱ.

SB 685 will simply accelerate the timeline to achieve the RB21 goals and raise the expectations for partner agencies who oversee housing resources, employment opportunities, educational services, legal documents, and other community partners to play a role in assuring that the most vulnerable young people in the state find success – and at a minimum avoid experiencing homelessness and exploitation. The bill will ensure that youth fully understand their rights and the resources available to them through DHR and community partners. Furthermore, the taxpayers of the State of Maryland also stand to save a considerable amount of money as DHR pivots more fully toward housing and self-sufficiency services. A 2004 study revealed that providing housing to homeless and at risk youth was a tenth of the cost when compared to leaving them on the streets; \$5300 for an annual housing subsidy versus \$56,000 for a restrictive juvenile justice or residential placementⁱⁱ.

According to data submitted to DHR by emergency shelters, transitional sheltering, and other forms of sheltering including motels and churches, approximately 7% (1,408) of the 21,947 individuals who reportedly experienced homelessness in Maryland between July 1, 2010 and June 30, 2011 were young adults ages 18 to 24. A biannual census of youth experiencing homelessness found that there were 640 homeless youth ages 13 to 25 on a given night in 2011 in Baltimore City alone.ⁱⁱⁱ The count was based on

data provided by public schools, juvenile justice and social service departments, and various other agencies and organizations, and expands the count beyond youth found in shelters. The overall point-in-time homeless count in Baltimore City grew by 20% from 2009 to 2011, while the homeless youth count increased by 50%. **Since 2007, the homeless youth count in Baltimore City grew by 135%.**^{iv}

Arming DHR with the right amount of resources and a focus on moving young people towards economic self-sufficiency and housing stability is the most important key in reversing these trends. This bill accomplishes this in a number of ways:

SB 685 increases the likelihood that former foster youth – including those who have become homeless – will know their rights to reenter care under certain circumstances.

SB 685 addresses a common barrier to housing and employment by ensuring that foster youth will have state-issued identification, vital records, and other important documents when they leave care.

SB 685 recognizes the critical need to promote affordable housing and employment opportunities for former foster youth by requiring DHR to report the excellent work of local DSS directors and staff to increase partnerships with public housing authorities, workforce development leaders, and other community-based providers.

SB 685 recognizes that courts can play an important role in promoting accountability and collaboration in transition planning for older foster youth.

HB 685 recognizes the critical need to promote affordable housing and employment opportunities for former foster youth. Young people aging out of foster care are already included as a special population within Maryland’s Qualified Allocation Plan for the purpose of distributing housing tax credits – this legislation simply adds the expectation that DHR should be working with housing entities to trigger these types of resources for youth.

The National Center for Housing and Child Welfare strongly supports SB 685 and urges a favorable report by the Judiciary Committee. Please contact Ruth White, Executive Director at 301-699-0151 or via email at rwhite@nchcw.org with questions.

ⁱ Maryland Department of Human Resources. (2013). *Ready by 21 Manual*. Retrieved: <http://www.dhr.state.md.us/documents/SSA%20Policy%20Directives/Child%20Welfare/Ready%20By%2021%20Manual%2010-2013.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Van Leeuwen (2004) found that this approach to permanent supportive housing for homeless youth cost a tenth of a placement in youth corrections or residential treatment. Supportive housing averaged \$5,378 annually compared to \$53,655 for corrections and \$53,527 for residential treatment. Source: Van Leeuwen. (2004). Reaching the hard to reach: Innovative housing for homeless youth through strategic partnerships. Special issue on housing and homelessness. *Child Welfare* 83(5), 453-468.

ⁱⁱⁱ Astone, N. & Pologe, R. (2011). Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for Adolescent Health. http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/center-for-adolescent-health/_includes/2011%20parallel%20homeless%20youth%20count%20report-final.pdf

^{iv} Ibid.