



May 8, 2013

Chairman Reichert and Subcommittee Members,

My name is Mandy Urwiler. I am a Senior Network Representative at The Mockingbird Society in Seattle, Washington. I was placed in foster care on November 5, 2009, when I was 15 and my son, Nicky, was 4 days old. I am in a program called Extended Foster Care now, in college, and in my own apartment with my now 3 year old son.

As a Senior Network Representative, I represent the voices of the approximately 500 youth in our statewide Network. I advocate on their behalf for solutions to the issues they experience in the system every day. One of the major advocacy roles I play is sitting on the Normalcy Workgroup, commissioned by the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care. The Mockingbird Society was invited to the Normalcy Workgroup because youth in our Network had concerns about their normal life experiences in care being so different from experiences of youth in "intact" families. So far, the workgroup has changed the procedure for background checks for overnight stays away from their foster home, reducing completion time from a month or more to a maximum of one week. We are also creating a training for social workers to increase opportunities for normal childhood experiences.

To give a little personal perspective, when I was placed in care, I found myself not having a lot of opportunities that I had when I was at home. For instance, I wasn't able to go on any school field trips, including some that were required, because my foster parents weren't allowed to sign the permission slips, and I never had enough notice to get them to my birth-parents. Unfortunately, this is a common occurrence for youth in care.

Another example that perhaps isn't even normal for foster care, but has a much more significant impact, is the state's insistence that my son be placed in foster care, rather than let me keep him in my custody. Because of my age and status as a foster youth, I had to fight this court. I won that fight, yet my social worker told me that I needed to place my son in foster care with a Voluntary Placement Agreement. She said that it was so that they could pay my foster parents enough to cover expenses for Nicky. Again, I found that to be untrue, my caregivers could receive additional support without bringing my child into the system. On April 9th, 2010, a judge awarded me sole custody of my son. I was successful in this effort only because I advocated for myself and my son. But not all young parents in care are in a position to be a self-advocate while facing barriers that don't exist for youth from intact families.

The second we enter care, we are at a disadvantage. Whether it is going on a field trip or maintaining parental rights, youth in foster care should not face barriers to opportunity and success based only on their status as foster youth.

Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely,

Mandy Urwiler

mockingbirdsociety.org
206.323.KIDS (5437)
2100 24th Ave S, Suite 240
Seattle, Washington 98144