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Good morning. It is my great pleasure to be part of today's hearing on Letting Kids Be Kids. I thank the committee for the invitation to be here. I also want to commend the committee for inviting a young person to give testimony as well. The involvement of young people in all aspects of our work is a defining feature of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. We know first-hand that results are always better when young people are involved in the decision making process, and I know that Talitha James' involvement today will add a great deal to today's conversation.

I am policy director with the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a national foundation named in memory of Jim Casey, the founder of United Parcel Service (UPS). We were created by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs as an independent foundation in 2001. We now have more than 20 philanthropic partners who co-invest in our work, including the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and local foundations ranging from the Hawaii Community Foundation to the Sherwood Foundation in Omaha, and the Duke Endowment in North Carolina.

About the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

We are focused solely on helping states and communities assist older youth in foster care in making successful transitions to adulthood. We support efforts in both rural and urban areas in 16 states. We are working with young people in places as diverse as Albuquerque, New Mexico; Indianapolis, Indiana; Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Detroit and Traverse City, Michigan; Des Moines, Iowa; Atlanta and Cherokee County, Georgia; Jackson and the Delta counties of Mississippi.

In the states in which we work, our local partners always include young people who have experienced foster care. We also partner with the child welfare agency, local bankers and businesses, representatives from two- and four-year colleges, and private agencies. Together we implement a set of strategies that include engaging young people; bringing together private and public partners; using data to drive decisions; and galvanizing public support in order to improve policy and practice. Our strategies focus on improving the outcomes of transitioning youth, outcomes that ultimately build into two key areas that we know will help these young adults thrive: helping them build permanent relationships in their lives and providing opportunities to achieve economic success. For example, we implement a focused financial literacy training program that offers young people the Opportunity Passport™, one of the nation's most innovative matched savings programs for youth.

The Jim Casey Initiative applauds the committee's focus on examining barriers that stand in the way of young people in foster care having normal and healthy adolescent experiences. For more than 10 years, we have worked in communities, including some represented by members on this committee, to promote systemic changes that help young people transition successfully from foster care to adulthood. In pursuing our mission, we have seen countless examples of the ways in which youth in foster care are denied some of the most basic experiences that are typical to most teenagers and young adults.

But we also know from our experience that young people in foster care can have positive experiences, with the help of committed professionals, foster families and others working alongside them. Even so, nearly 30,000 young people age out of foster care each year, and far too many begin their transition to adulthood without having had the positive and supportive experiences in adolescence that are the foundation of a successful adulthood.

Today I will share with you the barriers that young people in foster care have faced – barriers that have prevented them from having a normal growing up experience. I'll also share how the Jim Casey Initiative is working to normalize the foster care experience through policy change and public will building. A key underpinning to our approach is the knowledge we now have about adolescent brain development. This science provides compelling evidence on why these "normal" experiences are so vitally important. I'll start by highlighting a few examples.

Why "Normal" Teenage Experiences are Important

Adolescence is a time of profound brain development paralleling that of early childhood. The brain is not done developing at age 3 or 6, as previously believed. Beginning in the early teen years, the synapses that are being used are strengthened, and the ones not being used are weakened. This extensive rewiring can be compared to a network or wiring upgrade on a computer. The brain is becoming faster and more sophisticated. It is becoming wired for adulthood.

During this time, teenagers and young adults exhibit behaviors that are often viewed as troublesome, such as mood swings, excitement and more extreme risk taking. Despite the many sleepless nights these traits cause parents, they are actually tremendous assets at this developmental stage. Becoming an adult and taking on adult responsibilities inevitably involves taking on risk, and a teenager's brain is literally primed for risk-taking since chemicals in the brain that act to link such action to pleasure are shifting during adolescence.

We have also learned that the impact of trauma on brain development is not permanent. The brain can alter its structure in response to experience. This is called neuroplasticity. And, in fact, positive

relationships and experiences in adolescence support resilient brain development. The brain can rewire, recover, and thrive - despite previous exposure to trauma.

Based on this finding of increased neuroplasticity during adolescence, we now know that no young person is a lost cause. There is no 'point of no return' beyond which trauma-informed services and relationships with caring adults can positively alter a young person's life trajectory. In fact, adolescence is a time rich in opportunity and potential to help young people overcome adversity through positive experiences. It's a time at which we can help these young people get on a better path.

As Josh, a young person from Tennessee, astutely observed: *"Just knowing that brain development does not stop is an enhanced opportunity to overcome negative experiences. This new information not only identifies that traditional thought that youth are stuck at this place and doomed for failure, but also outlines what we need to do to turn these traumatic experiences around and rewire the brain and help these youth be successful, regardless of what happened to them. By doing that we are ... establishing connections, connecting youth with resources in the community. It's more than just a person or one thing that happens, it's a continuum."*

Healthy Risk Taking

What does this knowledge tell us about being a teenager? Adolescent brain development research has done for us, in many ways, what the research on early childhood brain development did. It tells us that what families typically, and naturally, do for their own teenagers is vital to building those neural networks that support the social, emotional, and coping skills they will need in adulthood.

As children grow, their parents expose them to opportunities that gradually increase their decision-making and self-sufficiency. They introduce their children to more and more people in the community – teachers, coaches, clergy, and others who develop influential roles in young people's lives. And parents allow kids to build their own relationships – from "playdates" to prom dates.

Parents do this through letting their kids be kids – letting them join a sports team, try out for the school play, take a part time job, spend time away from home at camp or at a friend's house, or begin dating. These activities all involve a degree of risk. Any parent knows that. Yet gearing young people towards these kinds of normative risks and healthy relationships will mean they are less likely to engage in more dangerous adolescent risks and unhealthy relationships.

A Positive Youth Development Approach

This leads to support for what is called a positive youth development approach -- an intentional, prosocial approach to engaging young people. Science tells us that opportunities for exploring one's strengths, for building a variety of relationships, for making decisions about one's life, and for failing and recovering from failure are all necessary aspects of healthy development. These opportunities support the brain development needed for a successful transition to adulthood by "wiring" the brain for adult cognitive functions, such as planning and decision-making.

Research has shown that the development of resilience is an interactive process, taking into account the presence and level of risk factors as well as the presence of protective factors. An often neglected area for young people transitioning from foster care, the building of "social capital" -- or relationships in the areas of family, school, community, and peers -- are vital protective factors. The higher the quantity, quality, and value of a young person's social networks, the greater the chance there is of resilient development. While these types of relationships are the strongest protective factor, others protective factors include having high expectations, a strong self-image, a sense of purpose, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.

Barriers to Normalcy for Young People in Foster Care

For nearly ten years, the Jim Casey Initiative has worked closely with young people from around the country who have experienced foster care first-hand. We have learned much from listening to them and gaining their perspectives about what works and what doesn't work in smoothing their transitions to adulthood. These young people often identify a lack of normal growing up experiences as a major barrier to the relationships and opportunities that they yearned for and that we know are so important to healthy adolescent development. These include a wide range of examples that can be grouped in several key categories:

1. **The day-to-day experiences of young people in foster care make them feel different from their peers.** In small and big ways, the day-to-day foster care experience often results in youth feeling stigmatized and different from their peers. For youth who live in congregate care or group homes, differences can be even more pronounced. Many young people who lived in group homes while in foster care tell us that the impersonal and rigid living environment of a group home often led them to feelings of isolation and presented barriers to normalcy. They've shared examples of how the different "levels" assigned by group homes determined how much normalcy they could have. For example, a young person at the zero level (sometimes referred to as "lock down") would have little or no opportunity to participate in external activities. Upon earning points, one might move to a different level, thereby earning certain "privileges," such

as an opportunity to visit with siblings. Upon reaching a higher level, they might earn a chance to use electronics or the ability to get paid for chores. Other aspects of group home life that presented barriers to normal adolescent activities include early curfews that made it difficult to participate in after school programs or team sports.

The environment of a group home is not the only contributor to what makes young people feel disconnected from normal activities. One young woman lived with a foster family that liked to go camping. Yet in order to take her along on a simple weekend camping trip, they needed a month of preparation in order to receive approval and were required to report on every aspect of their trip. Several young people reported not being able to get transportation, or basic fees covered, to participate in sports or other activities in which they were interested.

- 2. Young people in foster care often internalize what they called a “culture of no.”** For many young people, stories of their time in foster care include examples about activities or experiences that they wished they could have participated in, such as continuing to practice one’s faith, participating in sports or other extracurricular activities, getting their senior picture taken or joining friends’ families for special outings. Yet they were often denied those things that their peers take for granted. When asked about who was denying requests related to these activities, young people said it varied – maybe the foster parent, the manager of the group home, or their Guardian Ad Litem. It didn’t matter, because after being denied once, twice, or even three times, the young people often stopped asking for things and began to assume that that answer would always be no. Young people have wondered: why they must have “No” as an automatic response, as opposed to figuring out a “Yes?”

- 3. Young people in foster care crave a feeling of belonging and more normal family experiences.** Adolescence is a time when parental and peer relationships are among the most influential factors in a young person’s life, yet too many young people in foster care lack the stability of these relationships. In sharing their stories and perspectives about their time in foster care, many young people say the hardest part is being separated from siblings. When they were able to see their sibling, it was while sitting in a room for an hour, rather than being engaged in typical sibling-type interactions. Many had little or no experience with any type of family vacations or interstate travel. In fact some refer to being sent to “respite care” (time away from their foster family) during periods when their foster family was on vacation with their own biological children, rather than being included in a family trip. When asked why, the young people were unsure why they hadn’t been able to go along. Was it because the family didn’t want them along? Was it too expensive to take them? Or, as with the young woman whose foster family went camping, was the bureaucratic red tape just too much to deal with?

- 4. Supports and services for young people in foster care come with expiration dates.** Older youth aging out of foster care often experience fear, rather than excitement, as they reach their 18th birthday and lose access to many of the services they need. For those who access extended services, those too have expiration dates with some services ending at age 21 (e.g., the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program), and others ending at age 23 (e.g., Education Training Vouchers or ETVs). Young people worry about what happens when they get cut off at their next birthday, not yet having completed their post-secondary education or workforce training.

Insights gained through Jim Casey's effort to normalize the foster care experience

Over the past ten years alone, more than 200,000 teenagers have aged out of foster care - without achieving permanent family connections. And without a family or other supports, many of them faced difficulties immediately upon aging out of foster care. The Jim Casey Initiative this week released a report that very conservatively estimates the cost of poor outcomes for one cohort of young people aging out of foster care to be \$8 billion dollars over their lifetime. The most costly bad outcomes are a result of events, decisions and behaviors that occur within a very few years – or even days – as homelessness and dropping out of school often happens immediately after leaving foster care.

Young people tell us that they left foster care without skills for the real world, and often because they aged out from congregate care facilities.

Nicole, a young woman from Delaware, put it this way: *“It’s kind of like sink or swim. If you don’t learn how to swim quick enough, you drown and there are no lifeguards around.”*

Yet, these young people harbor a resilience that is powerful, as powerful as their drive to connect to families. They have the same aspirations for college and success in life as any young person. Normalizing their foster care experience can help them develop their adult skills – so they can swim – and build connections with people who can be their “lifeguard” if they start to sink.

From our efforts in states to normalize foster care, we’ve acquired the following insights:

- **Policies must support young people in foster care being involved in normal activities.** Child welfare agencies often work in fear of being liable for harm coming to a child in their care, and fear of being blamed by the media and their legislature when something goes wrong. This creates a risk-adverse culture. Therefore, it is critical to implement policy that makes it clear that young people can participate in “normal” activities, and, in fact, that the child welfare agency is doing something right and good for the children in their care, even if something does

go wrong. It helps provide clarity and consistency across the system. Without clear policy or incentive, too often what we see in states is that it's left to individual group home worker, caseworker, foster parent or other caregiver to determine the activities in which a young person may or may not be involved. If the paperwork is too much, if the cost is too high, if the resources aren't available, or if there is even minimal risk, it is far too easy for the answer to be "no."

Some examples of positive state efforts include:

- In 2008, Judge Jim Payne, then Director of the Indiana Department of Child Services, distributed a Director's Note to the entire agency on normalcy. It stated: "I have been concerned for years about our handling of children who come into our care and our desire and responsibility to allow them to have a normal life. This is more apparent and appropriate the longer the child is in care and probably the older the child is while in our care. But it includes all children." The message included specific instructions regarding letting children engage in normal activities, and concluded with: "Let's let children be children and support and encourage activities and events that allow them to grow up as normally as possible under the circumstances and time."
- Recently, a group of New England Commissioners have come together with their state youth boards to collectively develop a "normalcy" policy for all the New England states to adopt. The policy is currently in development, but in early versions, the young people have identified things such as being able to date, have a sleepover, participate in sports, and have curfews past 5pm.

At the federal level, policies to promote "normal" activities of young people across all states could help state child welfare agencies overcome an extreme risk adverse approach. While there are risks, the cost of lost opportunities is too high for these young people. Preventing them from normal growing up experiences means cutting them off from their community, peers and caring adults who could positively influence their lives. We must prioritize their well-being and development over our fear of the risks. After all, these are the kinds of risks that parents across America take each and every day with their own teenagers.

- **We must promote opportunities. It's not enough to just remove barriers.** While policy is an important step, it is also important that our practice promotes young people's involvement in the kinds of activities that are critical to their development. Young people in foster care should have a variety of age-appropriate opportunities made available to them, for these very experiences can turn their lives around.

Foster parents and other caregivers must have the information, training and supports necessary to encourage young people in their care to follow their interests and passions, whether that's joining the traveling soccer team or taking a dance class. Yet caregivers also need access to resources that will help them enroll their foster child in activities and provide transportation. And they need other supporting policies, such as the ability to have a friend's parent drive the young person to and from activities without subjecting them to a background check. Together, these efforts send the signal that these types of activities are important and valued by the young people in our care.

One Jim Casey Young Fellow, Brittany, stated it simply: *"Build confidence—let youth exercise their interest."*

We must also promote specific activities that meet the needs of young people and support their transition to adulthood. For example, the teenage years are a critical time to begin to develop workplace and financial literacy skills. In fact, research has shown that teenagers in foster care who have early employment experiences are much more likely to be employed by age 24. Yet not only is early employment sometimes not promoted, it may be discouraged, or even seen as an unnecessary privilege, to have a part-time job.

As for financial literacy, while most teenagers have had at least some practice managing money, many young people in foster care have never even received an allowance. The Opportunity Passport™, which provides young people with opportunities to earn money and save in a matched savings account, has shown that young people can and will save money for approved assets, and that they learn financial management skills along the way. It has also worked for young people with greater challenges such as those who are young parents or those who have been homeless. In fact, we have found that they utilize it at even a higher rate than most. Why has it worked, from Detroit to Atlanta to rural Maine and in Hawaii and Nebraska? Because it provides what most families do for their teenagers and young adults: real life experiences managing and saving money, and resources for developmentally appropriate assets -- a car to get to work and school, a deposit for an apartment, or a computer for school.

At the federal level, other programs that offer after school and extracurricular activities to at risk youth could be encouraged to provide opportunities specifically geared towards young people in foster care. Additionally, federal considerations could include repurposing existing funding streams from ineffective approaches (such as check writing courses) to effective, experience based activities (such as early employment or matched savings accounts). States, such as Maine and Michigan, having implemented the Opportunity Passport™ and seen its

impact, have begun to utilize their Chafee funding to support it. Georgia developed a statewide matched savings account for young people in foster care. These kinds of experiential, developmentally appropriate services will be utilized and will change lives.

- **We must ensure that young people are truly engaged in decisions about their lives.** Too often young people in foster care have been entirely disconnected from their previous lives, and are never even asked, “What interests you?” or “What were you involved in before foster care?” or “What would you like to do?” We must give young people a voice and a say in their own lives if we want them to flourish and explore their interests. Engaging young people in their case planning – where decisions about their life are made -- is no different than a family sitting around the kitchen table talking with their teenager about the upcoming school year and planning what activities they want to be involved in, what kind of part time job they might get over the summer, and other key decisions in the teenager’s life.

States such as Iowa have implemented a youth decision-making model that emphasizes relationships and places the youth at the center of their planning, asking the young person about their dreams and goals. As you can imagine, this is a dramatically different starting place than focusing on the negative life experiences that led a young person to foster care. It’s merely asking, “What about you is special?” rather than “What about your life went wrong?”

Federally, policies, incentives and accountability measures could be further strengthened to ensure that youth-led case planning is utilized from the early teens. The Jim Casey Initiative recommends starting at age 14.

- **Reduce reliance on congregate care.** In terms of providing normal experiences that will let young people in foster care develop the skills needed for success in adulthood, congregate care poses many challenges. First, congregate care is overused for teenagers. Some teenagers with particular challenges may need extra support that group settings provide, but those numbers are small. These are young people who have done nothing wrong themselves – in fact, they have been abused or neglected and often experienced trauma – yet they are placed in an unnatural environment most often due to a foster home shortage. However, once in congregate care, they are immediately considered “troubled.”

Further, while peers are important to teenagers, steady parental figures are so much more important at this age. And with the restrictive nature of congregate care settings, the lack of a consistent adult presence, and the restrictions imposed lest the adults get too “attached” to the kids, it is hard for young people in these settings to develop those healthy adult relationships. Several young people have commented that while it’s great to be with your peers

in foster care, it's also important to be with other people in other situations so that you are not only exposed to those with similar problems as your own. Additionally, young people in these types of settings are typically not allowed a significant amount of decision-making, and any mistakes they do make (and as we all know, teenagers do make mistakes), result in out-sized, atypical punishments and even more restrictions.

There are many barriers to normalcy for children and teenagers in foster care. Foster care is not normal. Yet there are practical things that we can all do – and they are the very things that most parents do for their own children. These young people deserve no less.

Just this week, as a key component in the Jim Casey Initiative's work in states to ensure normalcy in the lives of older youth and young adults transitioning from foster care, we launched our national "Success Beyond 18" campaign, which aims to significantly improve outcomes for these young people. The campaign aims to help states extend foster care beyond age 18 in a developmentally appropriate way, and promotes changes in case work and oversight so that young people in foster care have a say in decisions made about their lives, and that judges, child welfare agencies, or others responsible for their well-being recognize them as emerging adults, with unique and evolving needs. We have submitted more information about this campaign with our testimony.

As this committee considers policies and practices that can increase opportunities for foster youth and allow foster parents and foster youth to make reasonable decisions about their participation in everyday events and activities, we have an unprecedented opportunity to give these young people more meaningful roles in their own life planning – a critical step toward creating a better path for young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to address the committee.

This concludes my testimony, and I now welcome your questions.