

## Paris Hilton Oral Testimony

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Neal, and Members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss how to improve care for the nearly 400,000 children that are living in the foster care system as we speak.

While my experience was not through the foster care system, I know from personal experience the harm that is caused by being placed in youth residential treatment facilities.

When I was 16 years old, I was ripped from my bed in the middle of the night and transported across state lines to the first of four youth residential treatment facilities. These programs promised “healing, growth, and support,” but instead did not allow me to speak, move freely, or even look out of a window for two years. I was force-fed medications and sexually abused by staff. I was violently restrained and dragged down hallways, stripped naked, and thrown into solitary confinement. My parents were completely deceived - lied to and manipulated by this for-profit industry... so can you only imagine the experience for youth who don't have anyone checking in on them?

Today, residential facilities are warehousing tens of thousands of foster youth and adopted youth - innocent children who have lost their families and have nowhere else to go. This \$23 billion dollar industry sees these children as dollar signs and operates without meaningful oversight. We are sending youth a signal that profit is more important than their lives.

16 year old Cornelius Fredericks' was placed in a facility because his mom tragically died, and his dad was in prison. His life ended after being restrained by eight staff members for nearly ten minutes after innocently throwing a sandwich crust in the cafeteria.

Ja'Ceon Terry's life ended at just 7 years old. In his final hours, he was publicly shamed, verbally abused, left in his room alone for nearly six hours, and physically restrained by staff members until he lost consciousness. When first responders arrived, there was vomit in his mouth and throat, running down his cheeks and onto the floor.

As a mom, these stories break my heart. When your child is born, your heart is full of all the hopes and dreams you have for them. I assure you that these were not the dreams that were envisioned for Cornelius, Ja'Ceon, and thousands more who have suffered immensely.

I am here to be the voice for children who currently do not have one, while this committee has the responsibility to move bipartisan solutions forward to protect them.

I strongly advocate for the reauthorization of Title IV-B. Families need resources and support so they don't need to come into the child welfare system in the first place. For children who do end up in foster care, we cannot allow them to grow up in cold facilities that act like kid prisons. The treatment these children have had to endure is criminal. These kids deserve to grow up in safe, family-centered environments.

I will not stop until America's youth are safe. I have helped pass 9 state laws on this issue, I am strongly advocating for the federal bipartisan Stop Institutional Child Abuse Act, I supported the Senate Finance Committee report "Warehouses of Neglect" that validates everything those with lived-experience have been saying, and I recently went to Jamaica to support and find appropriate placements for American adopted youth who had been raped, waterboarded, held in solitary confinement in a facility internationally. Their parents had adopted them when they were young, promised them a better life, and then shipped them off to an international facility to be warehoused there until they turned 18. Progress isn't an option anymore, it's a life or death responsibility.

If you are a child in the system - hear my words - I see you, I believe you, I know what you're going through and I'm not giving up on you. You are important, your future is important, and you deserve every opportunity to be safe and supported.

Congress, please join me in creating a world where ALL children have a right to family, love, education, and the support they need.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions.