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**Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee,**  
**Subcommittee on Work & Welfare**  
**Aging Out is Not a Plan: Reimagining Futures for Foster Youth**  
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Good morning, Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways & Means, Subcommittee on Work & Welfare. I am honored to be here today to give my testimony. I am here to share how family, peer connections and community are vital to supporting young people from foster care in achieving their dreams, goals and becoming healthy and well adults.

My name is Ramond Nelson. I am 29 years old. I graduated from Temple University with a Bachelor's degree in Political Science after earning my Associates Degree in General Studies; I am currently in graduate school at Temple working on my Master's in Education with a focus on adult learning and organizational development. I wouldn't be here today speaking with you without the support, love and friendship of many people: my mom, aunt, grandma, foster parent, peers I met at FosterClub, brothers from Omega Psi Phi Frat Inc, professors and more.

I entered foster care when I was 13 years old, however, my family could have used support much earlier in my childhood. I'm a product of a single mother from Pittsburgh PA, who struggled her life to raise her three sons with me being the middle child.

When I was 5 years old, my mom's mental health challenges led to her not being able to care for us and needing in-patient support. During that time, my aunt moved in with us; she stayed even when my mom returned home to support our stability. She moved out after a few years. After that, we had a couple good years and then my mom started having increased mental health challenges, again. Due to persistent instability in the home, basic needs such as secure shelter, nourishment, and supervision were inconsistently met. I often relied on my grandmother to fill in the gaps, ensuring we had food and a semblance of normalcy.

When our family was disrupted, my brothers and I faced adult decisions at far too young ages. My older brother emancipated, my younger brother entered kinship foster care and stayed with our grandmother, and I entered foster care through the care of a trusted family friend. We went from being under one roof to being separated, each navigating our own path. This family friend who took me was a part of leadership on the Northside of Pittsburgh that provided mentoring to youth and teens. I asked the program director to be my foster parent. He said yes. I am grateful for the support I had and we're still in contact to this day; I wish there had been more support for me AND my biological family.

Before foster care, and while we were in foster care, I wasn't aware of resources available to help me, my brothers and my mom. I wish we had been provided with education on resources available and mental health support, so my mom could have gotten more help to navigate her mental health and take care of us. I wish I would have understood her mental health challenges

and I had tools and resources to support her. My grandma, even when she took my little brother in, wasn't equipped with enough financial support and other resources to help her care for my brother. She eventually lost her housing, and my little brother came to stay with my foster parents and I. I know there are resources that could have prevented that. My foster parent wasn't provided with much information on the resources that were available to him, and to me and my brother.

While I was in care, it often felt like the court and caseworkers were just checking boxes, rather than truly seeing or supporting us as individuals. Because I wasn't considered a "high-risk" youth and didn't fit the typical stereotype of someone in foster care, my mental health needs were often overlooked. Even during court, I never felt like my well-being was a priority.

As a result, I didn't trust the system; I felt like everyone knew everything about my life, wanted me to be vulnerable, and no one was vulnerable or open with me. I didn't know about the available resources because I wasn't informed about pivotal things that could have a positive effect on my life; my foster parent didn't know because no one told him either. If I would have known that the Chafee Program's Education and Training Voucher existed, I could have made different choices about my education.

When I was close to graduating high school, I chose to go to a community college, and had to work multiple jobs while in school to take care of myself. My foster parent supported me as much as he could, but he didn't have a lot of financial resources. Having to work full-time while going to school full-time meant I wasn't able to take the fullest advantage of my educational endeavors and I was unable to figure out what I wanted to focus on and how to plan to get there.

In 2018, I learned about FosterClub, the national network for foster youth, through my educational liaison. I was accepted into an internship program for young people who experienced foster care, just like me. FosterClub was the first time in my life that I knew my story mattered. I spent 8 weeks with 15 peers and learned more about myself and the resources available to foster youth than I had in the entire 7 years I was in the Pennsylvania foster care system. I met peers who had experienced similar situations as me and were pursuing college; I felt inspired to continue my own education. I created long-term friendships, learned about the systemic structures of foster care and how that impacted my personal experience in the system. I finally felt heard, valued and understood; I was able to share my experiences and help other youth who were still in foster care - something I never experienced while I was in the system. It was at FosterClub that I learned about the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV), but since I was 22 at the time - I was ineligible. Despite my ineligibility, I continue to partner with FosterClub to inspire other young people like me and change the system so others don't have to experience the same things I did. After my first internship with FosterClub, I decided to transfer to Temple University.

After being accepted into Temple, I took a full-time job working nights and attended school during the day - just to cover my rent, food and basic necessities. I saw several of my peers with

parents who paid their rent and amenities and created a space where they could fully focus on their education. I wish I had some of the same financial and relational support so that I could focus more on my education. Knowing about housing and educational resources like Chafee could have provided important assistance, but I found out about the resources too late.

In my last semester of undergrad at Temple, I got a call that my mom had passed away. I vividly remember my last phone call with her; she was doing better and was excited to attend my graduation ceremony. I had to travel from Philly to Pittsburgh and inform both of my brothers of the passing of our mother. I had to navigate every aspect of my mother's burial, both the financial and emotional piece. I had to go to the morgue, find a funeral home, pick out a casket, and plan a funeral service all while grieving and figuring out how I would pay for it as a full time student. My grandmother had already passed, so she wasn't there to support me. The friends I made through FosterClub and my fraternity stepped up; they helped raise funds so I didn't have to pay for it all on my own. They helped me plan the service in a way that honored my mother. Without my friends and chosen family, I wouldn't have made it through such a difficult time.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to return to school after that, but I remembered my last conversation with my mother and that was about graduating college. I wanted to keep my promise to her, so I went back to Temple to finish my last semester of undergrad. Prior to my mom's passing, I was already struggling with housing stability. I spent 18 days homeless after my mom passed when I returned to Temple. I slept in the library at school when I could, showered at work before my overnight shift, and tried to maintain my classes and homework during the day. Now as an adult, I had even more limited resources than I did in foster care. Thankfully, I had a professor who helped me secure a down payment for an apartment. Securing housing made it easier for me to focus on finishing the semester. However, there were a lot of stipulations on the scholarship assistance that I later had to pay back to the government. If I had received housing support through Chafee, I might have avoided the trauma of homelessness, and I wouldn't have faced the added burden of being taxed on the little help I did get for housing.

I urge you to understand these truths from my experience:

- The system failed me; the system failed my mother and brothers. The system failed to support my grandma, so she could care for us and we could stay together. I didn't know about resources that Congress has put in place for youth like me, because the system didn't tell me about them.
  - I'm not here to only tell you about the system's failures. I want to offer solutions that could have changed my life and can change the lives of other youth like me who are currently in care. Each of the points where the system failed could have been different:
    - **Comprehensive mental health** support could have helped my mom. Being able to participate in family therapy and access any mental health support could have made a difference for myself and my brother.
    - **Peer support:** Being able to connect to my peers while in foster care could have supported me in not feeling like I was alone, and helped me

understand how other youth were managing their parent's mental health challenges while in the system.

- **My family & community:** Investing in my family and community connections - helping navigate my relationship with my father, supporting my siblings and I, asking me which relationships were important and showing me that I was more than just a checkbox.
- **Learn about resources:** Tell me, multiple times, about the concrete education, housing and financial resources I am eligible for. Look for opportunities to increase flexibility in how I access, especially if I learn about it late. Provide me support to navigate the system and resources - like Chafee, ETV and housing. I learned about these resources too late - after I qualified
- **Support navigating the system:** No one should have to navigate the system on their own. This is true for both me, my mom and my brothers. As young people, we need more opportunities and programs like FosterClub to connect us with our peers who are experiencing foster care -- while we are in care. My mom could have benefited from having someone who could help her find the resources and support that were available; as a family, we could have used this help.
- **Relationships:** Young people like me need resources and concrete support; **most importantly**, we need and deserve FAMILY, COMMUNITY, and FRIENDS who will be there for us long after we exit the system.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you today. I am here because of my family, friends and community; there are so many other young people just like me who can't be here, because the system failed them in both relationships and resources. Please ensure the system prioritizes our relationships, while we are in foster care and when we are transitioning out; this is what sets us up for success.