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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 Smith, Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and Members of the U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work and Welfare.

My name is Kimberely Webb. I am a 20-year-old living in Farmington, Missouri. I currently work as a Correctional Officer for Farmington Correctional Center. With plans to make it a career. I have been in foster care 3 times. The first time was when I was 6, then 12, and finally 16. My parents struggled with addiction. My parents addiction led to neglect and physical abuse. When I was 6 and placed in care I was placed in two different foster homes. I was in care for 9 months. I was separated from my siblings at my first placement. I was later placed with my siblings. Being placed in the foster home with my siblings led to additional trauma. Not because of my siblings but because it felt like whatever I did was wrong in the eyes of the foster mom. One of my worst memories is being with the placement, getting shoved in the pitch-black basement to the bottom step of the stairs in the middle of winter. Another was the night before we went home with our parents, where I was goofing off before bed with my sisters. They had tickled me and made me laugh. The foster mom stormed into the room we were in and grabbed me by the hair and slammed me into a corner.

My second time being in care was an eleven and half month nightmare. I was 12. My little sister was in a different home from myself, and I was with my older sister that was in care. I was worried for the longest time that I was going to wake up and find my older sister had taken her life. It wasn't until almost 3 months of being in care had we reunited with our little sister and was placed together in a different placement. This placement would take food from my little sister and make us eat food we were allergic to. After about a month and a half we were moved to another placement. We were placed in a total of 5 different homes in almost a year. We never stayed in one placement for more than a month until our last placement. I was placed in foster care the last time when I was sixteen. I was able to be placed with my older sister who had been released from custody. It was a struggle for my older sister to even take placement for me due to Children's Division being worried that she was young and a lot of trauma from her own foster care past. They didn't know if she would be able to provide stability and appropriate care for me. I have been in care 4 years now.

Due to being moved around so much keeping up with peers academically was hard. Each new placement meant there was a new school and a different part of the curriculum. I either already knew what was being taught or they were so far ahead of where I was in the last school I was too behind to understand. This led to poor grades, poor self esteem and poor mental health. I had anxiety that I would never catch up with my peers. The anxiety was not isolated to just my school setting but developed into social anxiety everywhere. After being placed back with our parents I was taken out of school mid-way of my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year. I was not re-enrolled in school until I was placed in the custody of my sister. I did not get to have a regular high school experience. The only way I was able to graduate with my class was to take the HiSet test. I did not get to participate in any of the “normal” high school activities. I will never be able to make those memories that my peers had due to the instability in my life from being in care.

When I wanted to go and try to get my permit. I would need my birth certificate and/ or my social security card. If I wanted a job at that time I would have needed them as well. It took almost a year to get my birth certificate. Due to my past case worker who would forget about it all the time. I wasn't able to get the documents on my own because I had no proof of my identification. It wasn't until a year later asking my current case worker did, I get my birth certificate. We then applied for my social security card. With having both I was able to get my permit then later my license/ real ID. After I graduated high school. I began looking for work, but no one was hiring. So, I had started babysitting for my sister until I could find a job. I could only apply to places that were in walking distance from my home as I did not have any other means of transportation. I lived in a town that public transportation is nonexistent. Finding work within a mile radius of the house was hard. I was able to get employment at Subway. I worked at Subway until I could save up to get a car. Again my area was not one where additional resource funding was available for foster youth to get help financially for the purchase of a car. Due to having no credit, I had to finance a car through Car-Mart. You could compare Car-Mart to a payday loan shop, they are predatory on people in hard circumstances with little choices. The requirement of full coverage insurance on top of the payment was expensive topping out at \$1250 a month. Having a car did allow me to pursue work further away at a local factory where most of all my income went towards my transportation.

While getting my permit was easy for me, it isn't for most youth. Getting my license was much harder. I was able to participate in a program called Keys to Independence, but I personally did not care for the instructor who was contracted to teach me how to drive. I

had only about 4 hours in total of experience with driving when I was made to do the driving test even though I did not feel anywhere near ready for it.

I was given an opportunity to join a TLSS program (Transitional Living Scattered Sites). And moved to Farmington, Missouri. Driving back and forth an hour one way was horrible. So, I started looking for a new job. I applied to multiple places and only heard back from one. Farmington Correction Center. I accepted and to this day still work there. I love the job and wish to turn it into a career. While living in the TLSS program, I get to do classes to help get me prepared for living independently. These classes range and include cooking and budgeting skills. These classes are a mixture of peer to peer learning, case managers teaching and off site classes. The classes aren't people just telling us what to do or paperwork/reading skills, they are hands on and realistic for your situation.

While staying in my TLSS program they build up "paying bills." Whereby paying your "bills" goes into a savings account that you get back when you leave the program. This gets the youth used to paying bills as well as saving for the future with a strong safety net in place. I could use the savings for a down payment on a new car or even a house, as is one of my goals. In the program we work toward the goals we want. If we encounter a barrier we can develop goals to overcome them in a safe environment as well. My goals for my future that I am working on is becoming a homeowner. And when I feel the time is right, I wish to become a foster mom to teens. I want to be a positive, stable a safe support for teens that I never had.

About a year and a half ago, I entered a program called Regional Older Youth Advancement of Life Skills or ROYALS. Where case workers let the older youth be heard. They work hard to build connections with the youth. The ROYALS program provides specialized case management for youth in foster care and works with us to develop and achieve our goals.

The ROYALS program did not treat me like just another case number on their list. Case workers took the time to build a real relationship with me. They spent one-on-one time teaching me life skills—not just talking about them but showing me how to do them. Some of them was budgeting using my clothing voucher or putting in a job application. They didn't boss me around or make decisions for me—they gave me the information I needed and supported me in making my own choices.

What makes ROYALS profoundly different is how much they believe in young people leading the charge in their own lives. They introduced me to opportunities I didn't even know existed—like Child Advocacy Day, Voices of Change, the State Youth Advisory Board, and Leadership Academy. Through those, I got the chance to use my voice to advocate for myself and for future foster youth. I was able to connect with other foster youth who have

gone through the same or different situations that I have had. My ROYALS worker didn't just focus on traditional life skills but helped me build skills in real time that I can use for the rest of my life like meeting new people, controlling my social anxiety, being able to step out of my comfort zone and push for what I want in this life. We have traveled together, laughed, carried on deep conversations, over come barriers and celebrated together.

The truth is that a lot of foster youth feel like they're just a burden on the system. But ROYALS made me feel like I mattered. Like I could succeed. Like I had a whole community walking beside me—not behind me, not in front of me, but with me.

I believe real improvements for older foster youth could be made by expanding the ROYALS program and allowing all older youth to have access to it. The support I received should not be the exception—it should be the standard. Allowing me to have a choice in decisions made with my case. Being able to precipitate in court or an FST meeting. Giving feedback on a decision, not stating this is how it goes, but giving advice that you get to choose how to use.

ROYALS workers could also play a critical role in educating current foster care managers, GALs, juvenile officers, and even judges—many of whom don't understand the big differences between working with children and working with youth transitioning into adulthood. The policies are different. The needs are different. And the approach must be different.

We need to expand housing options for older youth. I currently live in a TLSS program where we have classes that the youth lead. It could be what the worker thinks we need to work on or if we ask, we work on what the youth wants. We need to prioritize transportation and make it accessible, because many of us do not have the same support that youth outside the system take for granted. We need to make sure that every youth in care receives their vital documents—licenses, permits, social security cards—because without them, getting a job, housing, or even hope becomes nearly impossible.

But most importantly, the biggest improvement we could make is for everyone involved in the foster care system to take a cue from ROYALS: listen to older youth, walk beside them, and give them the chance to take charge of their independence—with a guiding hand, not a controlling grip.

Because when you do that—when you invest in us—we rise.

Personally, I have worked extremely hard to become independent and have made huge strides toward breaking the cycle of the welfare system. I am looking forward to my future! I'm currently working toward purchasing a home, continuing to build my career with the State of Missouri, and one day becoming a foster parent to older youth.

Since my very first time in custody, I have dreamed of being a mother. And I have especially dreamed of becoming the kind of foster parent that takes in teens—so they do not have to feel that same rejection or denial of a loving support system just because of their age.

Thank you again, Chairman Smith, Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and Members of the Committee for inviting me to testify.