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Deputy Commissioner, Family Permanency Services
Administration for Children's Services

Testimony to the New York City Council
Higher Education and Children and Youth Committees

April 28, 2026

Oversight: Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current Former Foster Youth

Good morning. My name is Ina Mendez, and I am the Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Family Permanency Services at the Administration for Children's Services. I am pleased to be joined today by my colleague Sonia Gonzalez, the Executive Director of the Office of College Success Initiatives within my division, as well as our colleagues from CUNY and a young person currently attending CUNY. Thank you to Chairs Stevens and Joseph, and the members of the Children and Families and Higher Education Committees for holding today's oversight hearing on CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth.

We appreciate the opportunity to share more information with you about the supports both ACS and CUNY provide to young people interested in pursuing two- or four- year college degrees. As you will see, for ACS youth who choose to go to CUNY schools, much of our work is collaborative, and we value our ongoing partnership. Our testimony today will focus on ACS's College Choice program.

The success of youth in foster care is extremely important to us at ACS. This commitment to ensuring young people in our care are able to thrive led to the creation of Fair Futures, a first of its kind program providing over 4,000 young people in foster care and the juvenile justice system who are between the ages of 11 and 26 with tutoring and coaching—to build life skills, set academic and career goals, and provide ongoing support for youth. ACS has partnered with Chapin Hall to evaluate the implementation and outcomes of Fair Futures. Their [December 2025 outcomes study](#) report found that Fair Futures participants generally exhibited stronger persistence in school and higher graduation rates than comparable youth.

The success we are seeing with Fair Futures goes hand in hand with our commitment to ensure that if a young person in our care wants to pursue a college education, we will help that young person thrive. Today, over 471 youth are participating in College Choice, more than doubling the size of the program which served 200 when it began in October 2022, in FY 2023.

After hearing from young people that they wanted more choices about where they went to school and what type of housing they secured, and that they needed a stipend to be able to support themselves while focusing on their studies, College Choice was created-- building off of our prior college initiatives, including the CUNY Dorm Project and the Fostering College Success Initiative.

College Choice was specifically designed for students in foster care interested in pursuing a two- or four-year college degree. The program includes funding for the following:

- o Tuition: ACS will cover up to \$15,000 a year towards tuition and mandatory fees that are not covered by the student's financial aid award. We have found that this covers most if not all of the costs for youth as youth in care have access to several other college supports, including, Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI) which our CUNY colleagues will be discussing more fully, as well as the federal Chafee Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) which has recently extended the program age limit so students may now qualify until their 26th birthday.

- Housing: ACS will cover up to \$30,000 a year for housing. Youth are able to choose to live in on-campus housing, live in off campus private housing, live in their own apartment, or remain in their foster care placement. ACS, the youth's foster care agency and New York Foundling work closely with each youth to help them decide and find their best option.
- Stipend/direct cash assistance: ACS provides the youth with \$60 a day while the youth is in school each semester and summer session.
- Fair Futures coach: Youth can keep their Fair Futures coach until age 26.
- Support through NY Foundling: ACS recently completed an RFP process to contract with a provider to serve both as a fiscal conduit (to pay schools, landlords, etc.) and to coordinate academic advisement and other support services to ensure students who need extra support are able to remain on a path toward degree completion.
- Ongoing support: ACS provides year-round housing costs and the stipend for up to 6 months post-graduation, all of which helps youth graduating from college successfully transition to independence outside the college setting.
- Summer: ACS will continue to provide support for housing, tuition and stipends during the summer months for youth enrolled in summer courses, pursuant to their college dorm guidelines. About 60% of the youth in College Choice elect to continue the program during the summer.

College Choice has been very successful, and most importantly so have the youth participating. Each year we have seen more youth participate.¹ Due to this success, as part of the FY2026 Budget, we received increased funding for College Support, which is funded at \$15.7 million in FY26, and will be increased and baselined to \$18.8 million starting in FY27.

Currently, 301 of the 471 youth (63%) attend CUNY. The remaining students attend a variety of other schools such as University of Albany, Penn State University, NYU, Morgan State University, Xavier University of Louisiana, Depauw University and this year we have a student attending Scotland Conservatory of Music.

ACS is committed to supporting youth complete their college credits. We offer youth 15 semesters of support, which is more than most financial aid packages will offer. We have found that our students typically earn their 4- year degrees in 5-5 ½ years. College Choice does require students to maintain a cumulative GPA of 2.0, which aligns with college/university and financial aid eligibility standards. Our goal is to support youth during any challenges, so we work with each student individually, so that so long as the school will allow the student to remain enrolled, College Choice will continue to support the young person. For some students, the traditional college pathway is not the right fit, so we may connect them to alternative options, including our new Career Choice program, that provides vocational and job training assistance and other resources, like a stipend. Much like the national average, we find that approximately 30% of youth in College Choice do not persist in college.

¹ 2023- 200 youth; 2024- 378 youth; 2025- 430 youth; 2026- 471 youth

By and large however, students in College Choice and CUNY's program have been very successful. Let me tell you about a couple of those students.

We currently have a College Choice student who is on track to graduate this May with a Bachelor's of Science in Social Work from York College. LH's progress reflects significant growth over time. She began the program during the pandemic while also adjusting to starting college, initially entering the program with a 1.2GPA. Through consistent effort, engagement with tutoring, academic support, and active engagement in social emotional services, she raised her GPA to a 2.83 by the end of her Spring 2025 semester and remained on track ever since. Outside of school, she works at the Ali Forney Center, a 24-hour program that supports homeless LGBTQ+ and at-risk youth by providing shelter, food, and comprehensive services. In her role as a case worker, she continues to stay fully engaged in school while managing her professional responsibilities. She is also preparing to move into her own apartment in Brooklyn on May 1st.

Another student, S.M., attends Hostos Community College, majoring in Digital Music & Sound Design. He is a second-year student and an active member of the College Choice Support Services program. He is on track to earn his Associate's Degree this May and plans to continue his education at City College. He is interested in pursuing study abroad opportunities to expand both his academic and personal experience. He currently holds a 2.8 GPA and is working very hard to end the school year with a 3.0. He was featured in the New York Foundling's College Choice Support Services February 2026 Newsletter, and he left advice for his fellow students: "stay

consistent, ask for help early, and remember that progress matters more than perfection.” We couldn’t agree more!

In conclusion, I want to thank the Council for your commitment to the success of the youth in ACS’s care, to thank CUNY and NY Foundling for their invaluable partnerships in making College Choice successful, and most of all to the youth who are working so hard to obtain their college degrees and build successful lives.



JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS

**TESTIMONY OF PUBLIC ADVOCATE JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS
TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEES ON
HIGHER EDUCATION AND CHILDREN & YOUTH
APRIL 27, 2026**

Good morning,

My name is Jumaane D. Williams and I am the Public Advocate for the City of New York. I want to thank Chair Joseph and Chair Williams and the members of the Committees on Higher Education, and Children and Youth for hosting this hearing.

As of 2024, New York City’s foster care system was home to more than 6,000 children and youth.¹ Statewide, this population has trended downward over time with 12,184 foster care youth in residential placements recorded in 2025.² Yet the tangible impact of system involvement remains high, especially for older youth aging out of foster care. Outcomes for risks such as poor mental health, unemployment, homelessness, incarceration, developmental delays, and early pregnancy rise exponentially for children the longer they remain in the system. Both the city and the state have taken steps to mitigate these harms and offer support, but we know from the data that there still remains work to do.

Data released by New York City Public Schools in November revealed an increase in suspension rates among students in the city’s foster care system and those experiencing homelessness.³ The data follows the passage of [Local Law 147 of 2023](#), which requires separate numbers for foster youth as a means of better tracking student graduation outcomes and other needs. Overall, NYC public schools issued long-term suspensions to students in foster care nearly six times more than

¹ “Foster Care Population.” *Citizens’ Committee for Children*.

<https://data.ccnyc.org/data/map/1399/foster-care-population#1399/a/3/1661/132/a/a>

² “Become a Foster Parent.” *NYS Office of Children and Family Services*. <https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/fostercare/>

³ Sarkar, Susanti. “NYC Students in Foster Care Suspended At Higher Rates Than Peers, New Data Reveals”. *The Imprint*. November 2025.

<https://imprintnews.org/foster-care/nyc-students-in-foster-care-suspended-at-higher-rates-than-peers-new-data-reveals/268683>



JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS

other students.⁴ This administration must reinforce and support the work of the Office of Foster Care, launched in 2023 by the city’s Department of Education.

I’d also like to uplift the Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI), a program that provides support for students with a foster care background as well as eligible orphans. The FYCSI, partnered with CUNY, SUNY and select private colleges, helps support students with various aspects of college attendance including expenses like on-campus housing and tuition.⁵ Eliminating the barriers that bar students from higher education is even more critical for foster care students and homeless youth, who face additional challenges.

I look forward to working with this administration to aid and support foster care youth as they transition through the system. Thank you.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI)”. *City University of New York*. <https://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/student-affairs/programs-services/foster-youth-college-success-initiative-fycsi/>



**New York City Council
Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Children and Youth
Joint Oversight Hearing: Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth
Testimony Submitted by Michelle Avila, Director of Public Policy**

April 28, 2026

On behalf of Children's Aid, thank you to Chair Rita Joseph, Chair Althea Stevens, and members of the Committees for the opportunity to submit testimony on strengthening postsecondary pathways for current and former foster youth. We appreciate the New York City Council's leadership on issues that shape young people's stability, educational opportunity, and long-term economic mobility.

For over 170 years, Children's Aid has been committed to ensuring that there are no boundaries to the aspirations of young people and no limits to their potential. By offering a continuum of services throughout childhood, Children's Aid prepares young people to succeed at every level of education and every milestone of life. Today, nearly 2,000 dedicated full- and part-time staff serve nearly 50,000 children, youth, and families across more than 40 sites in New York City. Through our early childhood centers, community schools, community hubs, and health clinics, Children's Aid creates trusted spaces where families can access the full range of supports they need, close to home. In addition to direct service delivery, we engage in policy and advocacy at all levels of government, with priorities informed by proven strategies and the persistent barriers our staff confront while serving communities every day.

As an ACS-contracted foster care and prevention provider, Children's Aid supports young people through a continuum of critical services. In FY25, we served 941 youth through foster care programs and supported 2,898 children and 1,349 families in preventive services. Our work with young people makes it clear that postsecondary success is not solely academic. For young people with foster care experience, staying enrolled often depends on stable housing, reliable income, access to mental health supports, and sustained relationships with trusted adults, alongside strong campus-based academic guidance.

Children's Aid also wants to underscore that the progress made in supporting current and former foster youth in higher education would not be possible without the strong working relationships we have built with the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and the City University of New York (CUNY). These relationships have directly benefited our students, and we are deeply appreciative of the flexibility and problem-solving our partners have shown when individual circumstances require additional coordination.

The Importance of an Ecosystem of Postsecondary Supports

Children’s Aid strongly supports New York City and New York State’s investments in the interconnected set of programs that help current and former foster youth enroll in college, persist, and graduate, particularly Fair Futures, College Choice, and the Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI). From Children’s Aid’s perspective, the most important feature of these initiatives is not that any single program attempts to meet every need. Their greatest promise is realized when they function as a coordinated ecosystem: flexible financial supports paired with sustained coaching, academic navigation, housing stability, and other wraparound services that reflect the realities foster youth face.

This is what we see in practice. Tuition and fees are only part of the challenge. Many young people leaving foster care often do not have family resources to buffer unexpected costs, fill gaps between aid disbursements, or provide a stable home during academic breaks. Supports are most effective when they are timely and coordinated, especially during transition points like entering college, changing enrollment status, moving placements or housing, or returning after time away from school.

Children’s Aid’s Programs and Advocacy

Children’s Aid supports this ecosystem in multiple ways: as a direct service provider implementing Fair Futures; as a partner supporting young people who receive College Choice and FYCSI; and as a statewide advocate advancing policies that strengthen postsecondary pathways for foster youth.

Fair Futures

Children’s Aid is a proud partner of Fair Futures, through which youth ages 11–26 in foster care and those aging out receive long-term coaching, academic supports, and workforce development services. Coaching is the backbone of youth stability and equity; sustained relationships improve on-time grade progression, high school completion, postsecondary persistence, and employment readiness.

At our Next Generation Center (NGC) in the South Bronx, Children’s Aid operates Fair Futures coaching for approximately 100 youth ages 13–26 from across the five boroughs. NGC is also a Community Center and Boys & Girls Club serving over 300 youth ages 14–26, integrating education, workforce, and mental health supports in one trusted space. Our work focuses on two primary goals: (1) connecting youth to positive influences—school, work, and relationships with caring adults; and (2) diverting youth from negative influences—crime and incarceration.

College Choice

Children’s Aid also partners on initiatives that remove remaining barriers to persistence, including College Choice and other supports that address education, employment readiness, and stability for older youth. College Choice plays a crucial role in addressing the cost of attendance and housing needs for eligible students, and it is most effective when paired with consistent coaching and practical support that helps young people navigate requirements, solve problems in real time, and remain engaged through transitions.

FYCSI and FYSA

Children’s Aid proudly houses the Fostering Youth Success Alliance (FYSA), a statewide coalition advocating for responsive policies and programs that support youth with foster care experience. FYSA was established in 2014 to strengthen supports for youth in foster care across New York, particularly as they transition out of care. In 2015, FYSA led the launch of a statewide initiative to provide financial assistance and support services to students with foster care experience to expand access to higher education. This initiative became known as the Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI).

FYCSI was created to help fill gaps left after the application of federal financial aid and Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) funds. It provides direct financial support to eligible students who are currently or formerly in foster care, helping cover key costs of college participation. In Children’s Aid’s experience, this flexibility matters because academic persistence is inseparable from stability in other areas of life.

Current Challenges

Children’s Aid commends the City and State for investing in these initiatives and continuing to refine and expand support for foster youth pursuing higher education. At the same time, our direct service experience points to several recurring challenges that can be addressed through stronger coordination and targeted investments.

Housing Stability and Program Requirements

Access to stable, year-round housing remains one of the strongest predictors of college persistence for students with foster care experience. While housing supports through FYCSI, College Choice, and campus-based programs have been invaluable, students can still face challenges related to availability, timing, and eligibility, particularly during academic breaks or periods of enrollment disruption. Though great strides have been made, year-round access to CUNY dorms has proven an ongoing challenge, particularly over the summer, as students will soon be required to be in a summer class, at certain dorms like the Towers at City College, to remain in their on-campus housing, preventing young people from participating in internship or summer work experiences.

Academic Load Expectations and Student Wellbeing

Children’s Aid also observes that some program requirements, particularly expectations around full-time credit loads, can unintentionally create pressure for students whose personal, financial, or mental health circumstances make heavier course loads difficult to sustain. In some cases, these expectations exceed institutional academic requirements and may increase the risk of burnout or disengagement.

Financial Literacy

Another challenge is the lack of structured financial management supports for students receiving College Choice stipends, approximately \$1,800 per month. For many young people, this is the first time they have had access to a significant, flexible source of income, and without guidance, it can be difficult to budget for essentials and stay focused on academic goals. We must address this gap by investing in financial literacy/management education, aligned with College Choice

requirements, to help students plan for housing, food, transportation, and academic costs and stay on track.

Mental Health Supports for College-Enrolled Youth

We continue to see a significant unmet need for accessible, trauma-informed mental health supports for college-enrolled foster youth. While campus counseling services and community-based resources play important roles, demand consistently outpaces availability, and students with complex trauma histories often require more sustained support than current systems can provide.

Coordination and Clarity Across Programs

From a young person's perspective, the ecosystem can feel fragmented. Even when programs are working well, students may struggle to understand which supports they are eligible for, how to access them, and how those supports interact. Improving coordination across Fair Futures, College Choice, and FYCSI, through proactive referrals, clearer communication, and streamlined navigation, would reduce the burden on youth and help ensure supports reach students when they are most needed. Council could support a "no wrong door" approach, such as a centralized navigation/one-stop intake and referral pathway, or a shared streamlined process across agencies and campuses, so youth can get coordinated guidance on housing, financial aid, mental health, and academic supports without having to navigate multiple systems alone.

Addressing Transition Points

Transition points like entering college, housing transitions, changes in enrollment status, interruptions in schooling, or reenrollment remain moments of heightened risk. These are also the moments when timely support can make the difference between persistence and disengagement. Programs should be structured and coordinated to anticipate these transition points rather than relying on young people to seek support only after a crisis has already occurred.

Closing

Children's Aid strongly believes that investing in postsecondary pathways for youth with foster care experience is one of the most effective strategies for advancing equity and long-term economic mobility in New York City. These investments work best when they form a coordinated ecosystem: flexible financial support, stable housing resources, sustained coaching, and wraparound services that recognize the realities young people face as they transition to adulthood.

Children's Aid thanks the Council for its continued partnership and commitment to New York City's youth and families. We stand ready to work with the Council, the Administration, and partners across the city and state to strengthen and expand these supports so that current and former foster youth not only access higher education, but graduate with stability, opportunity, and a true pathway to independence.

Please feel free to contact Michelle Avila, Director of Public Policy, at mavila@childrensaidnyc.org with any questions regarding this testimony.



New York City Council
Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Children and Youth
Joint Oversight Hearing: Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth
Oral Testimony presented Megan Grunlund, Lead College Success Advisor
Tuesday, April 28, 2026

Good afternoon. My name is Megan Grunlund, and I am a Lead College Success Advisor at Children's Aid. In my role, I support young people who are currently in, or have previously experienced, foster care as they work toward success in college. A critical part of that success is access to safe, consistent housing.

About 65% of the college students we serve attend CUNY schools, and many rely on CUNY dorms for year-round housing. Campus housing provides stability, community, and independence, especially for students who may not have a family home to return to during academic breaks.

However, we continue to see policies that unintentionally place students in destabilizing situations. For example, this summer, the Towers at City College requires students to enroll in a summer class in order to remain in campus housing. At the same time, ACS's College Choice program—which has been pivotal in expanding college access for youth in foster care—requires students to engage in professional development during the summer such as employment, internships, or coursework.

One student I work with is graduating this May from a two-year CUNY college and transferring to a four-year CUNY in the fall. Because of the summer enrollment requirement, he is now at risk of losing his housing over the summer. Without an appropriate alternative, he may be forced to move into temporary placement for just a few months, disrupting his stability at a critical transition point.

When housing realities and program expectations are misaligned, students are forced to choose between remaining housed and pursuing opportunities that support long-term success. For young people who have already experienced instability, these disruptions can be deeply harmful.

Children's Aid is grateful for our strong partnership with ACS and CUNY, and we stand ready to work with them and the City Council to better align summer expectations so students can remain housed while building their futures.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.



New York City Council
Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Children and Youth
Joint Oversight Hearing: Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth
Oral Testimony presented Nubia Fields, Education Specialist
Tuesday, April 28, 2026

Good afternoon. My name is Nubia Fields, and I am an education specialist with Children's Aid. In my role, I work with high school students and younger college-enrolled youth. As these young people transition from high school to college, they are understandably concerned about whether the supports available to them will be sufficient and sustained to help them succeed.

Fortunately, New York City and State have invested in programs like Fair Futures, which meaningfully support young people with foster care experience in pursuing higher education. As a result, more young people with foster care experience are enrolling in college and working toward a degree.

However, the continued success of these programs depends on funding that responds to real service demand. Fair Futures has a \$30.7 million annual baseline and has grown from serving 3,000 young people to over 4,600 today. Yet, the current funding formula only reflects the number of youth formally in foster care, leaving out the number of youth ages 21 to 26 who continue receiving services after they exit care. With a limited funding pool, but a larger service population, this has resulted in fewer per-student resources like academic, advising, and stability focused supports that young people need to succeed in college.

In practice, staff are supporting more students with fewer resources, even as young people face rising housing, academic, and mental health challenges. Also, Fair Futures provides only partial funding for trauma-informed mental health services, contributing to unmet needs across the city, especially for older youth who no longer have the safety net of being formally in care.

Without increased investment, we risk undermining the very progress these programs were designed to achieve. I urge the Council to work with community partners, CUNY, and ACS to support increased Fair Futures funding that reflects service demand and the true costs of supporting foster youth through college completion.

Thank you for your leadership and for the opportunity to testify.



Leadership, voice and vision for child welfare in New York State

Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies

**Written Testimony Submitted by:
Dr. Sophie Charles, Associate Executive Director, Downstate**

New York City Council Oversight Hearing:

Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth

**Committee on Higher Education
Rita Joseph, Chair**

**Committee on Children and Youth
Althea Stevens, Chair**

April 28, 2026

The Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA) is the principal representative for nearly all the not-for-profit organizations providing foster care, adoption, family preservation, and juvenile justices services in New York State. COFCCA is comprised of over 100-member organizations, ranging in size from small community-based programs to the nation’s largest multi-service agencies – all of which share the mission of serving children and families. Approximately fifty of our member agencies are contracted by the NYC Administration of Children’s Services to provide child welfare, juvenile justice, and child and family services across the 5 boroughs of New York City.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the Hearing on Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth. We commend the City Council for its continued investments and support of young people with histories of foster care placement. The Mayor’s Office and the Council’s FY 2026 baselining of \$30.7 million in funding for Fair Futures provides significant opportunities for young people to access publicly funded college education. ¹ This hearing exemplifies the Council’s commitment to providing valuable resources to New York City youth as they navigate the many challenges of college life.

In this testimony, we highlight the following:

- Recognize ACS, foster care providers, and CUNY for delivering educational supports and resources to current and former foster care youth;
- Identify supports and resources needed for youth beyond educational supplies and;
- Recommendations for better supporting young people beyond tuition and educational supplies.

The Administration for Children’s Services and Contracted Providers Support the Educational Needs of Foster Youth

The Administration for Children’s Services Educational Support

There is immense gratitude for the New York City Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) and its partnership with the Center for Fair Futures for their commitment to providing essential educational support to young people currently or formerly involved in foster care. We commend ACS for being the first in the nation to fully support an educational and individual coaching model that guides more than 4,600 foster youth through career and academic programming. ² The implementation of the Fair Futures and College Choice programs represents critical pathways to self-sufficiency for foster youth pursuing higher education. The ACS College Choice program is another educational support initiative that offers additional opportunities to help young people currently in foster care as they navigate enrollment at CUNY. Collectively, through the Fair Futures and College Choice programs, approximately 500 youth enrolled in CUNY receive tuition and housing assistance, as well as weekly stipends. ³ The educational supports provided by ACS are remarkable and must be sustained and made available to all youth in care and those aging out of care in New York City.

¹ [Fair Futures Program](#)

² <https://www.nyc.gov/site/acs/youth/fair-futures.page#:~:text=Fair%20Futures%20has%20grown%20into,people%20ages%2011%20to%2026.>

³ [ACS College Choice program](#)

Contracted Providers' Contributions to Educational Supports

We recognize and applaud providers for their exceptional preparation and youth engagement efforts that help foster students enroll in and complete college. Contracted agencies and their staff are essential contributors to the success of the career and academic support provided to young people aged 11 to 26, who benefit from coaching and access to life skills through the Fair Futures and College Choice programs. Educational and academic guidance is delivered by a workforce of more than 460 coaches and casework staff employed by 26 foster care agencies and the Center for Fair Futures.⁴ This group of professionals exemplifies the dedication of child welfare first responders as they continue to implement and sustain the Fair Futures and College Choice programs for young people. Staffing support to recruit, hire, and retain a qualified workforce is essential to building upon the success of these vital programs.

Foster Youth College Success Initiative

Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI) is a New York State funded program that provides a pathway of support for foster youth, offering financial resources, mentoring, and guidance to help them successfully complete college.⁵ Since its inception, the program has served more than 2,000 students and has secured \$42.4 million in investments from New York State.⁶ FYCSI has resulted in successful outcomes for graduating students; however, there remains a tremendous need for additional support.

Supports and Resources Needed for Youth Beyond Educational Supplies

Many first-time college students often face challenges related to their preparedness for college, the ability to successfully enroll, financial barriers, the ongoing need for academic advisement, and the capacity to maintain continuous enrollment. Young people with foster care histories frequently encounter all of these challenges, compounded by a lack of family support, housing and food insecurities, mental health issues, and limited access to other basic resources. While the financial assistance, coaching, mentoring, and life skills support provided by programs such as Fair Futures, College Choice, and FYCSI are critical pathways to higher education, youth aging out of foster care require additional support that extends beyond academic access and supplies.

Students with foster care histories remain endangered by the following vulnerabilities:

- **Lack of Family Support**: Out-of-home placements often significantly disrupt family ties and cut off access to resources that young people rely on for success. Youth enrolled in college who have aged out of foster care may have no place to go during major holidays, spring and winter breaks, and summer vacations. These periods can be especially stressful as students scramble to find social connections and emotional support to sustain themselves when family support is no longer available.

⁴ <https://www.nyfoundling.org/press-release-mayor-adams-acs-commissioner-dannhauser-announce-expansion-of-programs-to-connect-youth-in-foster-care-to-college-for-free-offer-coaches-and-careers-celebrate-milestones-in-serving/>

⁵ <https://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/student-affairs/programs-services/foster-youth-college-success-initiative-fycsi/>

⁶ <https://www.childrensaidnyc.org/impact/stories/report-shows-financial-aid-former-foster-youth-leads-success#:~:text=The%20Foster%20Youth%20College%20Success,investments%20from%20New%20York%20State.>

- **Housing and Food Insecurities**: Residential housing and meals are significant benefits associated with college enrollment for young people who have aged out of foster care. Access to housing and food may not be available to students during school breaks. Inadequate housing and food

insecurities are likely to increase stress levels for students and impact academic performance when students are focused on meeting these basic needs.

- **Mental Health Issues:** Young people who have experienced traumatic events due to family separation and exposure to abuse and adverse childhood experiences often struggle with mental health challenges. Access to mental health care must be readily available as a vital resource to support their overall well-being and academic success.
- **Other Basic Needs:** College students require financial resources for clothing, transportation, emergencies, technological devices (such as phones, computers, and internet access), and unforeseen expenses. For students to be set up for success and to ensure there are no barriers to moving forward on their college journeys, funds to cover these basic needs need to be considered.

According to a recent NYC report, 62 percent of New York City residents do not meet the “True Cost of Living” (TCOL) measure, approximately 5.04 million people, do not have the resources to meet the cost of living in New York City.⁷ The challenges and financial pressures experienced by college students are even greater for unemployed young people who cannot rely on family support.

Recommendations

- **Invest in services and supports for All young people transitioning out of care, to support their academic and/or career/workforce development goals.**
- **Increase Access to Existing Higher Education Programs.** New York City has implemented three successful higher education programs that continue to produce positive outcomes and increase the number of foster youths earning college degrees. The City needs to expand student access to these existing programs.
- **Improve Cross-Agency Collaboration Among Stakeholders and Providers.** Enhanced communication and collaboration among all stakeholders and providers are essential to ensure alignment in the delivery of educational services and equity in the distribution of resources.
- **Invest in the Child Welfare Workforce:** The child welfare workforce plays a crucial role in the success of the Fair Futures and College Choice programs. The sustainability of these programs depends on having adequate staffing to effectively deliver services to young people. The Council needs to Invest in the child welfare workforce by emphasizing the importance of staff and recognizing their value through salary increases, scholarships, and tuition assistance. These investments will help agencies maintain a highly trained and credentialed workforce in child welfare.

⁷ [2026 NYC TCOL Measure_4 6 26.pdf](#)

In conclusion, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of strengthening CUNY pathways for current and former foster youth. COFCCA fully supports The Council's efforts to improve existing services and practices to better meet the higher educational needs of youth aging out of foster care. We are available to answer any questions or address any concerns you may have regarding this testimony.

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HEARTSHARE.ORG

April 30, 2026

Joint Hearing – Committee on Higher Education & Committee on Children & Youth Oversight: Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth

Good afternoon Chair Joseph, Chair Stevens, and members of the Committees,

My name is Shanon Shaw and I represent Heartshare.

For more than 100 years, Heartshare has served children, youth, and families across New York City, including young people in foster care who are working toward stability and independence.

We appreciate the Council holding this hearing. The focus on strengthening pathways through CUNY for foster youth is important, and long overdue.

From our perspective, the issue is not whether programs exist. It is whether young people can actually access and stay connected to them.

We see every day how hard it is for young people in foster care to get to and through college. They are navigating housing instability, financial pressure, mental health challenges, and the absence of consistent family support. College is layered on top of all of that.

Programs like Fair Futures, College Choice, and CUNY's Foster Youth College Success Initiative are making a difference. When young people have a coach, stable housing, and financial support, they stay enrolled. They graduate. That is real progress.

But the system is still hard to navigate.

Housing is one of the biggest challenges. Even with existing supports, too many young people are one disruption away from losing stability. That risk increases as they age out of care or move past the initial support window.

Awareness is another issue. Some young people never connect to these programs at all. This is especially true for those who are no longer closely connected to the foster care system.

Coordination also remains a gap. There is a lot of good work happening across ACS, CUNY, and providers, but from a young person's perspective, it can still feel fragmented. Delays, paperwork, and miscommunication can mean missed opportunities.

We also cannot ignore mental health. Many of these young people are carrying trauma. Referrals are not enough. Support needs to be consistent and easy to access.

I want to share one example.

We worked with a young person who enrolled at CUNY after aging out of foster care. They were doing well academically, but their housing situation became unstable. They started missing classes and were on the verge of dropping out. It took coordinated support and quick intervention to stabilize them and keep them enrolled.

That should not depend on luck or who picks up the phone. It should be built into the system.

We would recommend:

- Expanding longer-term housing options for foster youth, including after graduation
- Improving outreach so every eligible young person knows these programs exist
- Strengthening coordination and data sharing across systems
- Embedding mental health support directly into these programs
- Continuing to invest in programs that provide consistent relationships, like Fair Futures

Young people in foster care want to succeed. They are already doing the hard part. The system should meet them with the same consistency and support.

Thank you for your time and for your focus on this issue.

Shanon Shaw
Heartshare



Higher Education Committee and the Committee on Children and Youth
TOPIC: Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth
Tuesday, April 28, 2026

Testimony by:

Wendy Finkel

Vice President, Strategic Partnerships

JCCA

Good morning Chairs Joseph, Stevens and members of the Higher Education Committee and the Committee on Children and Youth. Thank you for the opportunity for JCCA foster youth, Kloreel Vinson and Rashad Pierce, to testify today.

My name is Wendy Finkel, Vice President of Strategic Partnerships at JCCA. I have spent my career championing youth in the child welfare system through a variety of nonprofit and government roles.

JCCA is a child and family services agency that works with about 17,000 of New York State's children and families each year. We provide foster and residential care, educational assistance, vocational supports, and behavioral health services. Our programs empower young people to pursue and achieve their goals and build a roadmap towards the future they envision.

A. JCCA's services to foster youth

JCCA works with foster youth to provide academic, vocational, and life-skills support to foster long-term success and independent living. These foster youth greatly benefit from Fair Futures support, in addition to our City Council Funded Wraparound Supports as they are transitioning out of foster care.

These programs have made a tremendous impact on the young people we serve. Over the years, thousands of youth received tutoring that helped improve their academic performance. In addition, foster youth in our NYC foster homes and on our residential campus receive coaching from our staff to develop a plan for life after high school, such as enrolling in college, vocational training programs, or securing employment. The youth also participate in workshops and group exercises on topics that prepare them for personal responsibility such as personal finance, budgeting, and grocery shopping.

B. Strengthening CUNY Pathways for current and former foster youth

Every year, a number of JCCA foster youth tremendously benefit from CUNY pathways. CUNY colleges are less expensive than private colleges, and our students generally attend at no cost, with the help of NYS Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) and Federal Pell grants.

ACS' College Choice Program also reduces financial concerns, allowing foster youth to reduce stress and focus on their studies. Youth receive \$60 per day for every day they are enrolled in college. These funds are used for meals, room and board, books and other college student expenses.

ACS' College Choice Program also provides a tutor, someone to check in with the youth for support, and navigate housing subsidies, giving the young people flexibility to meet their needs. For example, one JCCA youth preferred to live outside the dorms near campus, and College Choice Program now supports these choices.

JCCA does have current and former foster youth who benefit from these programs and grants and choose to attend college away from home. We support every child's choice. It should be noted that JCCA's foster youth have been more likely to graduate from CUNY schools, such as Hunter, Lehman, Bronx Community College and City Tech, than those who choose schools further away. For JCCA students who attend CUNY programs, they generally remain in communities they know with their support systems nearby.

Additionally, as young people approach high school graduation, they may not be clear on their future goals. Some of our youth elect to take a "gap year" and then enroll in a CUNY program.

C. Challenges that foster youth face

Many young people describe feeling unprepared to manage housing, finances, and adult responsibilities on their own. Young people are resilient, capable, and ambitious, but too often, systems meant to support them are fragmented or time-limited at the very moment when stability matters most.

We strongly encourage the City to continue to invest in supports for current and former foster youth who are pursuing secondary education, vocational training or joining the workforce. Funding that supports truly affordable housing or youth programs that are flexible and responsive to what young people say they need make a difference.

Conclusion

Thank you for inviting youth to testify about what pathways help ensure their success, as well as for keeping youth voices central in shaping resources for them.



Higher Education Committee and the Committee on Children and Youth

TOPIC: Strengthening + Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth

Tuesday, April 28, 2026

Testimony by:

Klo Vinson

JCCA-LEAP testimony

Hello I'm Klo Vinson and these are my thoughts on JCCA-LEAP. As a young adult, I wasn't sure how to navigate finding housing or managing all the responsibilities that come with it. JCCA LEAP supported me through the entire housing process, helping me search for an apartment, understand lease agreements, and make sure I had everything in place to move in. With their guidance, I was able to secure safe and stable housing and take that first step toward independence.

Beyond helping me find a place to live, JCCA LEAP taught me the independent living skills I needed to succeed. They worked with me on budgeting, paying bills, grocery shopping, and managing my time. These were things I had never fully done on my own before, and having that support made a huge difference. I felt more prepared to handle day-to-day responsibilities and more confident in my ability to maintain my own space.

Because of JCCA LEAP, I now feel capable of living independently and taking care of myself.

What once felt intimidating is now something I approach with confidence. Their support helped

me build not just practical skills, but also a sense of responsibility and self-assurance. I'm proud of how far I've come, and I feel ready to continue growing and building a successful future for myself.



Higher Education Committee and the Committee on Children and Youth

TOPIC: Strengthening + Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth

Tuesday, April 28, 2026

Testimony by:

Rashad Pierce

JCCA-LEAP testimony

Hello my name is Rashad Pierce. I often felt like my voice wasn't being heard. Coming into JCCA I dealt with a lot of transitions, especially the changing of my case planning team. I didn't always know how to speak up for myself or navigate the systems around me. JCCA LEAP gave me the support and guidance I needed to better understand my rights and how to advocate for what I needed. They created a space where I felt listened to, respected, and encouraged to share my goals and concerns without fear.

I struggled with my previous schools and my grades reflected that. Through their education services, JCCA LEAP helped me stay on track, find the right school and feel more confident in my academic journey. I received support with planning, staying organized, and understanding what steps I needed to take to reach my goals. Whenever I felt unsure, there was always someone there to guide me and help me problem-solve. That consistent support made a big difference and helped me stay motivated, even during challenging times.

Because of JCCA LEAP, I've grown into someone who feels confident speaking up and advocating for myself. I no longer feel alone when facing challenges, and I know how to express what I need in order to succeed. Their support helped me not only with my education, but also with building my confidence and finding my voice. Now, I feel empowered to keep pushing forward and take control of my future.



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TESTIMONY

Oversight - Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth

New York City Council
Committee on Higher Education
Rita C. Joseph, Chair

New York City Council
Committee on Children and Youth
Althea V. Stevens, Chair

THE LEGAL AID SOCIETY
199 Water Street
New York, NY 10038

April 28, 2026

Prepared by:
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Introduction

The Legal Aid Society (“LAS”) welcomes this opportunity to submit testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Children and Youth regarding oversight on Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth.

We thank Chairs Rita Joseph and Althea Stevens for offering the opportunity to highlight these issues.

The Legal Aid Society

The Legal Aid Society, founded in 1876, is the nation’s oldest and largest nonprofit legal services agency, providing comprehensive legal services to low-income individuals and families in all five boroughs of New York City. Legal Aid’s mission is to improve the lives of low-income New Yorkers by ensuring that no New Yorker is denied access to justice because of poverty. For 150 years, our growth has mirrored that of the city we serve. We have expanded our work to passionately advocate for individuals, families, and our youth by fighting for the most vulnerable populations not only in court, but also beside them in their communities, before the City Council, and in Albany in hopes that they will eventually receive true equity and be treated with humanity. We look forward to the day when Black and brown impoverished communities will receive the investments and support they need to flourish.

Legal Aid’s Juvenile Rights Practice provides legal representation to children who appear before the New York City Family Courts in all five boroughs, in abuse, neglect, juvenile delinquency, and other proceedings affecting children’s rights and welfare. Our staff typically represent approximately 30,000 children each year. Our perspective comes from our daily contacts with children and their families, and from our frequent interactions with the courts, social service providers, and State and City agencies whose practices impact our clients and their families. In addition to its individual representation, The Legal Aid Society also seeks to create broader, more powerful systemic change through its law reform representation. These efforts have benefited some two million low-income families and individuals in New York City and the landmark rulings in many of these cases have had a state-wide and national impact. Our experiences engaging in courtroom and other advocacy on behalf of our clients as well as through coalition building with other stakeholders inform our testimony.

In the Juvenile Rights Practice, our multidisciplinary staff support our clients who are nearing adulthood through important life transitions, including those involving post-secondary education, vocational training, and independent living. The expertise and tenacity of our borough-based Adolescent Practice Teams empower older youth in foster care, working to ensure that they

receive every available support and legal entitlement while in foster care placement and as they transition to adulthood and independence. In conjunction with staff from the Kathryn A. McDonald Education Advocacy Project, we are often advocating for youth to enroll in the NYC Administration for Children’s Services (“ACS”) College Choice Program and to obtain Education and Training Vouchers (“ETV”), and other meaningful supports that help many of our clients enter and successfully complete college.

Recommendations Regarding CUNY Pathways and College Access for Youth With Experience in the Foster Care System

We propose four recommendations to strengthen college success for youth who have experienced foster care and we address them in turn further below:

- (1) Require ACS to collect and make publicly available data about college entry, retention, and completion for youth currently or formerly in foster care;
- (2) Revise ACS’s College Choice guidelines to exclude fewer youth and expand needed support, including expanding eligibility to those who have left foster care within the past twelve months and ensure participant stipends are provided timely;
- (3) Expand ACS’s Fair Futures mentorship program to eliminate waitlists and ensure older youth have timely access to coaches;
- (4) Encourage CUNY to revise its policies to provide flexibility and grace periods for payment of fees and deposits and to develop completion, retention and forgiveness grants for students with foster care backgrounds.

Current and Former Foster Youth Need Expanded and Flexible Access to Educational and Financial Support

Strengthening pathways to postsecondary education for students with experience in the foster care system requires expanded funding, broader access to supportive programming, and more flexible policies. We strenuously recommend expanding the reach of ACS’s College Choice by increasing funding for the program to commit to serve all college-bound youth in foster care and revising guidelines to exclude fewer youth with foster care backgrounds, expanding ACS’s Fair Futures mentorship program to ensure access to coaches for all older youth, and instituting changes to CUNY policies to allow flexibility and permit grace periods for submitting payment for fees and deposits, and institute grant to assist students to remain or return to school.

Students who are or have been in foster care face significant barriers to educational success. Many have been removed from family and community supports and often lack supportive relationships with adults to guide them throughout their education. The instability these youth often experience as a result of frequent placement and school changes leaves them unmoored from caregivers, important peer networks, and school supports, like trusted counselors, administrators, and teachers. Their school performance can also be negatively affected due to learning loss and misaligned curriculums. Youth who have experienced foster care, and in particular youth with long foster care stays, tend to have complex mental health needs, shaped by experiences of trauma, instability, and unmet basic needs.¹ These challenges can continue into college, where these young people often face food and housing insecurity, strict deadlines and financial aid requirements, and secondary institutions' policies that presume family support, limiting their ability to be successful. These factors combine to increase the risk that youth with a history in foster care will not make it to college, or if enrolled, will eventually drop out.²

Although rates at which youth with current or prior foster care involvement are attending and completing college are improving, these youth remain some of the most educationally marginalized youth in the United States. Recent national statistics show that among youth with foster care experience, postsecondary enrollment rates range between 29% and 64%, while degree completion rates range from 8% to 11%.³ This data marks an improvement over the commonly cited statistics, now over 20 years old, that only 20% of foster youth enrolled in college and just 3% earned a degree.⁴ Despite this progress, young people who have experienced foster care are nearly five times less likely to complete two- or four-year degrees than students in the population as a whole.⁵

It is important to note that the statistics cited above come from samples from across the United States, due to the paucity of studies in NYC capturing post-secondary educational outcomes for youth in care. In NYC, despite the availability of data capturing the high school and GED/TASC outcomes of students with foster care backgrounds,⁶ no such data is readily available regarding post-secondary educational outcomes. The Council should require ACS to collect data capturing information about the number of students currently or recently in foster care who plan to attend college, enroll in college, graduate within six years, and who leave school. It would also

¹ Okpych, N. J., Whitman, K., Lee, J., Neria-Piña, L., Jackson, L. A., & Day, M. (2025). Secondary and Postsecondary Education Outcomes of Students with Experience in Foster Care: Systematic Review of the Literature From 2000–2023. *AERA Open*, 11.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ NYC CIDI, "Educational Outcomes of NYC Youth in Foster Care," December 2025. Accessed April 21, 2026. <https://www.nyc.gov/site/cidi/projects/educational-outcomes-nyc-youth-foster-care-2025.page>.

be helpful to capture qualitative data from youth who enter but do not complete college on the perceived barriers resulting in leaving school.

Expanding Access and Funding for Existing Programs, like College Choice and Fair Futures, Will Further Improve Student Outcomes

The College Choice and Fair Futures programs reduce many of the obstacles that often keep students who have experienced foster care from accessing and finishing college, but the reach of these programs should be expanded to serve more youth. Through comprehensive financial and academic support—along with the option to live in housing at CUNY or other institutions—College Choice offers opportunities to students that might otherwise be out of reach. The stipend helps our clients to meet their daily needs, which allows them to focus more on school. The housing and tuition funding afforded by College Choice broadens opportunities for students who have experienced foster care and gives our clients a chance to study at institutions that would have previously been out of reach financially. While ACS has expanded its capacity to serve students in the College Choice program, growing from approximately 230 youth enrolled in 2022,⁷ to 460 youth in September 2025⁸ and a projected “over 500 youth” in FY2027,⁹ not all youth in foster care enrolled in college are served by College Choice. Unfortunately, few statistics are available to better understand youth who are left out. ACS’s 2025 Strategic Plan mentions that “[a]s of September 2025, 541 applications for College Choice were received and 460 students were enrolled.”¹⁰ What we know from anecdotal experiences with Legal Aid’s clients is that some students fail to apply because they are not notified by their foster care agencies to apply for College Choice until it is too late, or encounter documentation issues that delay their applications. In addition to simplifying the documentation requirements for applying, ACS should commit to providing the benefit of College Choice to all youth in foster care who choose to enroll in college.

Although the College Choice program has been largely successful in uplifting students with foster care experience toward higher educational and supporting them through school, we suggest several modifications to the program that would better serve these students.

Timely Stipends: Our clients have reported that their stipends are often delayed until several weeks into the semester, without definitive time frames as to when they will start receiving them. During this time, these students struggle to take care of their basic needs, including food,

⁷ Mayor Adams, Administration for Children's Services Announce 'College Choice' Program to Help Cover Cost of College Expenses for Hundreds of Students in Foster Care. NYC Office of the Mayor. October 4, 2022. <https://www.nyc.gov/mayors-office/news/2022/10/mayor-adams-administration-children-s-services-college-choice-program-help-cover>. Accessed on April 27, 2026.

⁸ Fall 2025 Update to the ACS FY25-26 Strategic Priorities. NYC ACS. [strategic-priorities-fall-2025-2026.pdf](#). Accessed on April 21, 2026.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

toiletries and hygiene products, school supplies, and transportation, all stressors that take away from their ability to focus on their coursework. ACS must pay all College Choice students their stipends timely, starting at the beginning of the semester, but in cases where stipends will be delayed, the College Choice program should provide a grant at the beginning of the semester for students to ensure that these students can appropriately budget to meet their basic needs during this time.

Expand Eligibility: ACS should also revise the College Choice guidelines to allow youth to apply to College Choice within twelve months of their discharge from foster care, to provide support for youth who enter college shortly after leaving foster care. Currently one of the requirements of College Choice is that youth must “be in foster care with...[NYC ACS]...at the time you first begin participating in the College Choice program.”¹¹ Young people who are aging out of foster care, particularly those who are parenting, need additional time to prepare themselves and adjust to independent living before pursuing college. Often this means that these young people are only able to start college after they have been final discharged from foster care. Because the College Choice already allows youth to remain in (but not apply for) its program after final discharge from foster care until their graduation, students should be permitted to apply and enter College Choice within twelve months of final discharge.

End Fair Futures Waitlists: Fair Futures is another promising program that supports youth with their post-secondary education goals and should be expanded to fully meet the needs of college-bound youth. The Fair Futures model, which has been implemented in all 26 NYC foster care agencies with ACS contracts, provides 1:1 coaching, social-emotional, academic, career, housing, and life skills supports to young people from 6th grade to age 26.¹² Data released in November 2025 reported that “approximately 66 percent of the youths coached [through Fair Futures] in the ACS College Choice Program successfully completed the semester with a 2.0 + GPA, up from less than 50 percent before Fair Futures [was implemented.]”¹³ This increase in performance suggests that Fair Futures programming and coaches often serve as a necessary bridge of advocacy and support that our clients need, even when they are already enrolled in programs like College Choice. Moreover, Fair Futures coaches fill in gaps in experience and information when it comes to college-specific tasks that foster care agency educational specialists often lack, such as filling out FAFSA forms, navigating financial aid offers, enrolling in college, managing schedules, and obtaining necessary funds for deposits and other fees. We have heard reports from our older youth clients that Fair Futures coaches are more sensitive to their needs and offer them

¹¹ “NYC ACS College Choice Program Update to Program,” Academic Year 2025-2026.

¹² The Center for Fair Futures. <https://www.fairfuturesny.org/>. Accessed April 21, 2026.

¹³ “Press Release: Mayor Adams, ACS Commissioner Dannhauser Announce Expansion of Programs to Connect Youth in Foster Care to College for Free, Offer Coaches, and Careers, Celebrate Milestones in Serving New York City’s Youth - The New York Foundling” November 14, 2025. <https://www.nyfoundling.org/press-release-mayor-adams-acs-commissioner-dannhauser-announce-expansion-of-programs-to-connect-youth-in-foster-care-to-college-for-free-offer-coaches-and-careers-celebrate-milestones-in-serving/>. Accessed April 26, 2026.

flexibility with scheduling and communication, something that agency case workers and educational specialists often lack. We are aware that many of these young people, including youth who have college aspirations, are being placed on waitlists for Fair Futures coaches because the agencies do not have enough coaches to serve all eligible youth. Further expansion and funding are needed to ensure that all youth are appropriately served. Priority should also be given to clients age 17 and up to be matched with coaches. Once these young people are connected with a coach, they can receive coaching until age 26, an age at which some students are still enrolled in post-secondary school or other training, which will ensure that they have access to supportive resources to address their educational and vocational development on a longer-term basis.

CUNY Should Permit Flexibility and Grants for Financial Requirements for Youth Who Have Experienced Foster Care

The most intractable obstacle for youth in foster care who aspire to go to college is funding. Once they meet the academic prerequisites, youth in or recently in foster care must then find financial support to attend college. The CUNY system has a mission to provide “a first-rate public education to all students, regardless of means or background” and remains a beacon of opportunity for students, providing an affordable, lower-barrier education for many New Yorkers, including young people with foster care backgrounds. While the loans, grants and scholarships that come from financial aid applications often cover the majority of youth’s financial needs, many other costs, such as enrollment fees or housing deposits, are not covered by financial aid and often create significant barriers to prospective students with a foster care background. Many of these fees and deposits must be paid in advance of any financial aid awards or before programs like College Choice are involved with a student. Additionally, many of these students have limited financial means and/or are wholly dependent on their foster care agency to provide the funds for these payments. Because of this, these students often request these funds from their foster care agencies, and these youth must contend with lengthy waits for payments, often with no transparency from the bureaucracy of the foster care agency. While it is laudable that CUNY offers fee waivers for foster youth, CUNY should also provide the additional support of waivers and automatic payment grace periods for current and former foster youth to account for these payment difficulties.

Moreover, because educational matriculation is not linear for many current and former foster youth, and many young people often leave and return to school, CUNY should offer grants to assist youth with the small balances and fees that prevent students from doing so. Through its Reconnect program, CUNY already offers completion, retention, and forgiveness grants for older students seeking to start or return to school; these grants should also specifically be available for students with a foster care background.

Conclusion

Thank you again to the Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Children and Youth for looking closely at how to strengthen CUNY pathways for students with foster care history. We are happy to answer any questions.

Contact:

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THE BRONX DEFENDERS

TESTIMONY

New York City Council
Committee on Civil and Human Rights

Chairperson Sandy Nurse

Oversight – Fair Chance Act Challenges and Success

A. Introduction

The Bronx Defenders is a public defender non-profit that is radically transforming how low-income people in the Bronx are represented in the legal system, and, in doing so, is transforming the system itself. Our staff of over 450 includes interdisciplinary teams made up of criminal, civil, immigration, and family defense attorneys, as well as social workers, benefits specialists, legal advocates, parent advocates, investigators, and team administrators, who collaborate to provide holistic advocacy to address the causes and consequences of legal system involvement. Through this integrated, collaborative structure, we have pioneered a groundbreaking, nationally recognized model of representation called holistic defense that achieves better outcomes for our clients. Each year, we defend more than 20,000 low-income Bronx residents in criminal, civil, child welfare, and immigration cases, and reach thousands more through our community intake, youth mentoring, and outreach programs. Through impact litigation, policy advocacy, and community organizing, we push for systemic reform at the local, state, and national level. We take what we learn from the clients and communities that we serve and launch innovative initiatives designed to bring about real and lasting change.

Housed within the Integrated Civil Defense Team of the Civil Action Practice (“CAP”) at The Bronx Defenders, attorneys and advocates combat employment and reentry discrimination faced by workers with arrest or conviction records in New York City. Our advocates regularly receive referrals for workers who face discrimination, suspension, and termination from their employment due to pending arrests and convictions and as a result, we advocate and represent hundreds of clients a year whose employment is affected by the criminal legal system. This discrimination prevents our clients, everyday New Yorkers, from supporting themselves and their families. Furthermore, people of color are already disenfranchised and discriminated against at work. Coupled with the reality that they are also disproportionately targeted by the criminal legal system and arrested at much higher rates, employment discrimination based on an arrest or conviction has a compounding and disproportionate effect on New Yorkers of color.¹

At The Bronx Defenders, we fight this discrimination with a holistic and comprehensive approach. First, our Criminal Defense Practice will refer clients to CAP whenever a client has or may be subject to adverse employment consequences on the basis of arrest. Once a client is assigned to an attorney from CAP, the attorney assesses the best course of action based on the client’s unique circumstances. In CAP, our attorneys have assisted clients with many issues,

¹ Rachel Kleinman and Dr. Sandhya Kajeeepeta, Barred from Work: The Discriminatory Impacts of Criminal Background Checks in Employment, April 2023, available at <https://tminstituteldf.org/criminal-background-checks-employment/>.

including but not limited to preserving various licenses, informal advocacy with employers who have violated the Fair Chance Act so our clients can return to work as quickly as possible, and litigating Fair Chance Act violations with the New York City Commission on Human Rights (“CCHR”).

Between April 2025 through April 2026, The Bronx Defenders provided legal services in approximately 600 matters involving workers with pending arrests and criminal records. Further, The Bronx Defenders is a founding member of the New York State Coalition of Reentry Advocates (“CoRA”) that works to change laws, policies, and practices to eliminate the perpetual punishment that flows from involvement with the criminal legal system. As part of CoRA, CAP advocates engage in policy advocacy regarding reentry and employment at both the state and local level.

B. The Fair Chance Act Is Necessary to Protect the Most Vulnerable New Yorkers from Employment Discrimination.

Since the expansion of the Fair Chance Act in 2021, The Bronx Defenders has provided legal services to thousands of workers. The Fair Chance Act has fundamentally improved the landscape for vulnerable workers in New York City, allowing many of them to continue working while their criminal cases progress through the New York City court system and offering protections for individuals with criminal convictions.

Justice-involved individuals are already relegated to a second-class status throughout the nation, often barred from accessing housing, employment, and many other necessary services. At The Bronx Defenders, where we support clients facing legal processes often across multiple law systems, we commonly see how our clients’ inability to access or maintain employment due to criminal justice involvement, has many civil consequences and prevents individuals and families from being able to maintain stable housing, support themselves and their families financially, and meaningfully participate and advance their careers in the formal economy.

The Bronx Defenders has successfully leveraged the Fair Chance Act to advocate alongside our clients to reinstate, preserve, or obtain employment for hundreds of workers over the years. We have done so by sending notices and letters to employers who have violated the Fair Chance Act and informing them of their obligations under the law, negotiating settlements, and escalating to litigation when pre-litigation advocacy is unsuccessful.

However, while this law has been successful for many New Yorkers, many gaps still remain.

1. The City Should Increase the Capacity of the New York City Commission on Human Rights to Fully Enforce the Fair Chance Act.

At The Bronx Defenders, we rely on the Fair Chance Act to support our clients in preserving their employment. However, without the CCHR fully enforcing each Fair Chance Act case, much of our advocacy with employers, particularly those acting in bad faith, is unsuccessful. CCHR is the only government agency that has the ability to enforce the Fair Chance Act, so any

shortcomings and constraints due to the Commission’s capacity, especially when known and experienced by employers, can have dire consequences for our clients and vulnerable New Yorkers. A legal right has little meaning unless it can be enforced.

CCHR is facing many capacity constraints that limit its ability to litigate matters in a timely manner.² Currently, CCHR is facing extreme case backlogs, resulting in delays that force many of our clients to wait several years before their cases are resolved. Specifically, in 2025, the number of matters open for less than one year increased 25% from the prior year.³ In Fiscal Year 2025, the average number of days that a case remained open was 614, up from 592 the prior year.⁴ Additionally, the number of complaints successfully resolved through mediation decreased from almost half of all cases at the Commission to 31%.⁵ The number of administrative closures at the Commission was 44%, leaving many New Yorkers with pending claims without resolution or recourse.

It is our experience that employers are familiar with these backlogs and, as a result, feel less compelled by the threat of accountability, resulting in fewer clients being able to return to work through informal demands and advocacy. We also experience clients who choose to give up their rights to fight for employment or damages, even in cases of clear violations of the Fair Chance Act, because they cannot afford to spend years litigating these claims before the Commission, particularly given that these cases stem from one of the worst periods of their lives.

At The Bronx Defenders, we are deeply concerned with the preliminary budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2027 which threatens to cut CCHR’s budget significantly—from \$15.4 million in 2026 to \$14.3 million in 2027, despite making promises of a \$21 million budget.⁶ In order to protect New Yorkers, we urge the City to reverse this proposal and increase CCHR’s budget for Fiscal Year 2027 to allow for a fully staffed, well-budgeted CCHR. This investment is a necessity for vulnerable New Yorkers and is essential to ensuring that workers who have been discriminated against based on arrests and/or criminal convictions have the proper recourse and are protected.

2. The Fair Chance Act Should be Expanded to Apply to Current and Prospective DOE Employees and Contractors with Pending Criminal Cases or Convictions that Arise During their Employment.

The New York City Department of Education (DOE) is arguably the city’s largest employer, employing approximately 150,000 New Yorkers.⁷ Despite the Fair Chance Act’s expanded protections for workers in New York City, DOE employees are left out. Under New York City Administrative Code § 8-107(10)(h), city agencies are not required to conduct a Fair Chance Analysis for pending cases or convictions that arise during a person’s employment where the city

² Source available at <https://documentedny.com/2025/04/10/immigrant-labor-human-rights-commission-new-york/>.

³ Source available at <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2025/cchr.pdf>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Source available at <https://documentedny.com/2026/03/12/nyc-budget-guts-worker-protections/>.

⁷ Source available at <http://osc.ny.gov/files/reports/osdc/pdf/doe-issue-brief.pdf>.

agency follows a disciplinary process set forth in agency rules or as required by section 75 of the civil service law.⁸ As a result, the DOE believes it is effectively exempt from performing a Fair Chance Analysis for current or prospective employees with pending arrests or convictions that arise during a person’s employment.

Bronx Defenders clients who are employed by the DOE face significant challenges in maintaining their employment when they are arrested as DOE’s current practice is to suspend almost all employees regardless of what the individual is charged with. Our experience has been that all employees who are not subject to a collective bargaining that requires otherwise are, in fact, suspended. These suspensions occur without pay and without any room for advocacy until the criminal case resolves. These leaves many vulnerable New Yorkers, charged with seemingly unrelated offenses, out of work and without pay for several months unnecessarily.

As such, the Fair Chance Act is incomplete if it does not incorporate and contemplate the City’s largest workforce. We respectfully implore the Council to consider expanding the Fair Chance Act to apply to DOE employees and contractors with pending criminal cases.

3. Outreach and Education is Necessary for Employers to Understand the Protections from the Fair Chance Act and Prevent Discrimination Before It Happens.

The Fair Chance Act provides truly meaningful protections that do not exist under federal or state law to employees and job applicants with open criminal cases. Those protections, however, are only impactful when employers understand and implement the clear procedures that the Fair Chance Act requires.

One industry where this issue arises with high frequency is the field of home health aides. Almost on a weekly basis, we work with clients who were employed as home health aides (“HHA”) and were automatically suspended from their job following an arrest, in violation of the Fair Chance Act. HHA employment is subject to background checking requirements overseen by the New York State Department of Health, Criminal History Record Check unit. When a person employed as a HHA is arrested, the Department of Health sends the employer a “Notification of Charge After Hire” letter with information about the arrest charges. Though that letter does not require the employer to suspend the employee, many HHA employers respond by suspending the employee for the duration of the criminal case. Prior to the passage of the Fair Chance Act, when we received referrals like this, there was very little our advocates could do to restore our clients to employment because there was no protection for people with pending criminal cases. Now, we have seen significant success negotiating settlements that get our clients back to work when we educate employers about the requirements of the Fair Chance Act. However, not all HHAs have the benefit of a legal team to do this advocacy on their behalf and, even those who do, experience periods of hardship as a result.

⁸ 4 N.Y.C. Admin. Code § 8-107(10)(h).

Comprehensive outreach, training, and education around the Fair Chance Act is needed in order to prevent this type of discrimination before it happens.

C. Conclusion

We thank the Council for the consideration of this written testimony. The Fair Chance Act has been transformative for many New Yorkers and has the opportunity to support and protect many more. We hope the Council will continue to respond to feedback and make changes to the law that can continue to strengthen protections for vulnerable workers in New York City.

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Testimony of Shirley de Peña, Director

Foster Youth College Success Initiative

The City University of New York

New York City Council Higher Education and Children and Youth Committees Hearing

“Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth”

April 28, 2026

Good morning Chairs Joseph and Stevens and members of the Higher Education and Children and Youth Committees. My name is Shirley de Peña, and I serve as the Director of the Foster Youth College Success Initiative, or FYCSI, within the Central Office of Student Affairs at the City University of New York. I am pleased to be joined today by a current FYCSI student, McKeema Wallace, who you will hear from shortly. Thank you for convening this hearing and for your continued commitment to social justice, equity, and opportunity for students who have experienced foster care or identify as orphans. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about FYCSI and the ways in which CUNY is working very intentionally to support these students as they pursue their higher education goals.

FYCSI is a New York State-funded program designed to support current and former foster youth and eligible orphans as they pursue their first associate or bachelor’s degree. The program includes myself as Director, as well as part-time social work supervisors and master’s-level social work interns who support FYCSI students across the system.

FYCSI is funded entirely through New York State appropriations, and CUNY is grateful for the State’s continued commitment to supporting students with foster care histories. For FY26, CUNY’s allocation was approximately \$3.6 million.

Eligibility for FYCSI is based on foster care or orphan status. Students who are undocumented or who have refugee status may receive FYCSI funding if they meet program eligibility requirements. FYCSI is offered across all undergraduate CUNY campuses. Students are free to enroll at the campus that best meets their academic and personal needs and are not restricted in order to receive support.

CUNY uses multiple, coordinated systems to identify students with foster care backgrounds and ensure they remain connected to support. Students may self-identify during admissions or financial aid processes, be referred by campus offices, or be connected through external partners. A critical part of this work is our strong partnership with the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, or OCFS, which verifies foster care eligibility for all current and former foster youth. For students who qualify as orphans, FYCSI works directly with students to

review required documentation, including death certificates. We also work with students who were in foster care outside of New York State; while they are fully eligible for FYCSI, they are required to provide verification from the appropriate agency in their state of care.

Once eligibility is confirmed, FYCSI students are tracked centrally through CUNY's systems and in partnership with our data team, allowing us to monitor enrollment, persistence, and service utilization over time. CUNY evaluates FYCSI using multiple indicators, including year-to-year retention, continued enrollment, degree progress, and graduation outcomes.

Over the past ten years, the Foster Youth College Success Initiative has grown from a small pilot serving only a handful of students into a systemwide, high-impact program that has supported 1,360 unique current foster and formerly foster youth across CUNY, while distributing more than \$11.2 million in direct financial support to help students remain enrolled and persist toward their degrees. Since FYCSI became the primary foster youth program at CUNY in FY2020, the program went from funding 141 students in 2020 to 586 in 2025, an increase in reach by 415 percent, and allowing us to scale individualized, trauma-informed support across the system. This investment is producing real results: to date, 417 FYCSI students have earned at least one college degree, and a total of 521 degrees have been awarded, including 307 associate and 214 bachelor's degrees, reflecting that some students have gone on to earn more than one credential. Many additional students are currently enrolled and progressing toward completion.

Housing stability is one of the most critical supports FYCSI provides. Currently, approximately 80 FYCSI students are living in five CUNY residence halls. Four of these residence halls operate year-round, ensuring that students do not have to find alternative housing during academic breaks. One residence hall is not year-round, and students who live there do so by choice, typically because they have a safe and reliable option during breaks. For students who live in CUNY residence halls, FYCSI covers 100 percent of housing costs. In addition to housing, FYCSI funding covers tuition and mandatory fees, addresses prior and current bursar balances, and provides educational and transportation stipends to help offset the cost of books, supplies, and commuting. These supports are intended to remove the most common barriers to persistence and prevent crisis-driven interruptions to enrollment.

A defining feature of FYCSI is its case management model. We recognized early on that students who participate in programs such as CD/SEEK, ASAP, and ACE benefit tremendously from having a dedicated advisor who works closely with a cohort of students. While many FYCSI students participate in those programs, not all are eligible or choose to do so, though we maintain strong relationships with those initiatives and regularly encourage students to explore them. To ensure that no FYCSI student is navigating college alone, master's-level social work interns, supervised by licensed social workers, are automatically assigned to FYCSI students who are not already receiving structured advising through CD/SEEK, ASAP, or ACE. At the same time, students who are enrolled in CD/SEEK, ASAP, or ACE may also choose to work with a social work intern, and we gladly assign one when requested. This model allows students to receive individualized, high-touch support around academic challenges, personal stressors, housing

instability, and system navigation. With nearly 600 FYCSI students across 19 campuses, this structured internship model is essential. It is what allows FYCSI to provide the level of intensive, relational support that has become a hallmark of the program and that would not otherwise be possible with one full-time staff member alone.

Students with foster care histories often arrive at college having learned to be resilient, even when they have not always had the support to fully recognize their own worth and potential. We are deeply committed to helping young people see themselves in ways they may not always be able to see on their own, especially those whose circumstances and past experiences can shape how they view their worth, their value, and what they believe they are capable of achieving.

What I am most proud of in FYCSI is our ability to tailor our program so that we meet students where they are, support them in the ways that they need so that they can be successful on their own terms, not through a one-size-fits-all approach, but through flexibility, responsiveness, and care. For some, FYCSI is the only way students are able to attend college, have stable housing, and feel supported rather than alone. We strive to ensure that our students recognize their inherent value and potential, that they are met with care and dignity, and that their big and small achievements are seen and celebrated. One of the things we say most often to our students is that they are not alone, and that they do not have to navigate college or life alone if they do not want to. FYCSI exists to make that promise real.

I want to thank the Council for its leadership, its commitment to equity, and its unwavering advocacy for these students. I am grateful for the opportunity to testify and look forward to continuing this work together.



**New York City Council
Committee on Higher Education and Committee on Children and Youth
Joint Oversight Hearing: Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster
Youth
Oral Testimony presented Alissa Rouse
Tuesday, April 28, 2026**

Good afternoon, Chairs Stevens and Joseph. Thank you for holding this hearing.

My name is Alissa; I am a former foster youth who aged out of care. I am now studying biology at Borough of Manhattan Community College, and I am here today for the Foster Youth College Success Initiative also known as FYCSI.

While in foster care, I was enrolled in college. However, I did not have the support needed to succeed, which led me to withdraw from multiple semesters. At the time, I wasn't aware I was eligible for programs like College Choice or FYCSI, so I was never enrolled in them while in care.

Without that support, college felt overwhelming. I struggled financially and emotionally, which hurt my ability to focus on classes. I wasn't having difficulty due to not prioritizing my education, but instead because I was navigating college without the built-in support systems that many students have.

After enrolling in FYCSI last year, everything changed. For the first time, I had a support system that did not disappear just because I reached a certain age. I had access to people who believed in my ability to succeed and received financial assistance to pay for necessary expenses. Without that support, I can guarantee I wouldn't be enrolled in college now.

These programs give foster youth, like me, the ability to remain enrolled in school. However, there is still work to be done. We must ensure foster youth are informed earlier by making signage about programs like FYCSI visible in places where they spend their time, such as group homes and foster homes.

I can sit here today as I was given a second chance to pursue my education, and yet many other youth cannot say the same. With increased awareness of these programs, more young people can have an opportunity to pursue higher education.

When we age out of foster care, we do not age out of needing support.

Thank you for your time.



Fostering Youth Success Alliance
Written Testimony for Submission to the New York City Council
Committee on Higher Education jointly with the Committee on Children and Youth
Oversight Hearing: Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster
Youth

April 28, 2026

The Fostering Youth Success Alliance respectfully thanks the Chairs and Members of the Committees on Higher Education and Children and Youth for the opportunity to submit written testimony for the oversight hearing on strengthening CUNY pathways for current and former foster youth.

My name is Ashley Staggers, and I serve as Director of the Fostering Youth Success Alliance (FYSA). FYSA is a statewide coalition that advances policies and programs that improve educational, housing, health, and economic outcomes for young people currently in, or aging out of, foster care.

Higher education is increasingly essential for long-term economic mobility. Georgetown’s Center on Education and the Workforce projects that by 2031, 72 percent of all U.S. jobs will require some level of postsecondary education.¹ Yet young people with foster care experience continue to face significant barriers. Only 46 percent earn a high school diploma and only 3 percent obtain a bachelor’s degree, despite the majority expressing a desire to attend college. Financial hardship remains consistently cited barriers to persistence and completion.

Statewide Support for Youth with a Foster Care Background Pursuing Higher Education: The Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI)

In 2015, the New York State Foster Youth Success Alliance (FYSA) partnered with New York State to launch the Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI)—a first-of-its-kind, statewide program providing financial assistance and support services to students with foster care experience pursuing higher education.

Prior to FYCSI, New York lacked any statewide program designed to address the unique barriers faced by students with a foster care background. FYCSI fills this critical gap by providing flexible financial support to current and former foster youth, as well as orphans, enrolled at SUNY, CUNY, and private colleges with Higher Education

¹ Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., Van Der Werf, M., Quinn, M. C. (2023). After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031.

Opportunity Programs (HEOP). Funds may be used for a wide range of essential needs, including tuition and fees, housing (including intersession housing), books and supplies, transportation, and medical or personal expenses. Annual support typically ranges from \$5,000 to \$10,000 per student.

FYCSI is intentionally designed to be inclusive and accessible. Students of any age are eligible, provided they were in foster care on or after their 13th birthday, regardless of whether that care occurred in New York or another state. While FYCSI is available at all public colleges and private institutions with opportunity programs, students are not required to be enrolled in an opportunity program to receive support. This flexibility allows students to access both financial assistance and supportive campus environments without age caps or enrollment restrictions.

Unlike College Choice, which requires full-time enrollment, minimum GPA thresholds, and steady credit accumulation, FYCSI does not condition eligibility on academic performance or enrollment status. Instead, it functions as a flexible, gap-filling resource that reflects the real-world circumstances of students with foster care experience.

This distinction is critical. While College Choice provides comprehensive, last-dollar support for students who can meet traditional academic benchmarks, FYCSI serves a broader and often more vulnerable population. It supports students who may enroll part-time, pause their studies, return later in life, or must first stabilize housing, health, or family circumstances. By removing rigid requirements and age limits, FYCSI recognizes that educational pathways for foster youth are often nonlinear—and that persistence, rather than uninterrupted enrollment, is a more equitable measure of success. Together, FYCSI and College Choice play complementary roles in strengthening New York’s higher education support system for students with foster care experience.

Evidence of Impact and Ongoing Need

The FYCSI Impact Report documents a decade of public investment and growing demand. In academic year 2025–2026, total investment reached \$67.2 million, supporting 1,348 students statewide. While state appropriations increased by 3 percent over the past three years, per-student awards declined by 12.3 percent due to enrollment growth, highlighting the need to align funding levels with demand.²

The report also underscores persistent challenges around awareness. Seventy-seven percent of surveyed students learned about FYCSI only after already enrolling in college.

² Fostering Youth Success Alliance. (2026). Bridging Gaps and Building Futures: Charting a Path to Equity for Foster Youth in Higher Education.

Most learned about the program through their foster care agency, and 93 percent reported that the application process was clear.³

Student feedback illustrates how FYCSI directly supports day-to-day stability. Survey respondents most frequently used funds for textbooks (73 percent) and tuition (63 percent), and 64 percent reported that FYCSI reduced their need to work while enrolled.⁴

Additional evidence comes from the Rockefeller Institute’s evaluation of FYCSI at SUNY, which found that FYCSI recipients demonstrated stronger retention and associate degree completion outcomes than peers with foster care experience who did not receive awards, while noting that available data do not establish causation.⁵

Why This Matters for CUNY and New York City

CUNY is a core implementation partner for FYCSI alongside state agencies and other higher education systems. For New York City, the stakes are especially high. Many students with foster care experience face housing instability, food insecurity, and limited support networks while attempting to meet academic requirements. When basic needs are unmet, persistence suffers and FYCSI’s flexible design allows students to cover the real costs that often derail progress, including housing gaps during academic breaks, transportation, textbooks, and urgent personal expenses.

Recommendations for strengthening pathways at CUNY

Based on the findings from the FYCSI Impact Report and the Rockefeller Institute’s SUNY evaluation, FYSA respectfully offers the following recommendations for the Council’s consideration as it reviews how CUNY can strengthen pathways for students with foster care experience:

- 1. Improve early identification and proactive outreach:** Many students learn about FYCSI only after enrollment. Earlier awareness during application, admission, and orientation would help prevent financial crises.
- 2. Strengthen campus navigation and knowledgeable points of contact:** Students report varied experiences accessing staff knowledgeable about FYCSI. Clear,

³ Id.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Backstrom, B. (2024). *Fostering Success at SUNY: Financial Support through the Foster Youth College Success Initiative*.

visible FYCSI-informed contacts on each campus can reduce confusion and delays.

- 3. Address year-round stability needs that affect persistence:** Housing and basic expenses during recess periods continue to undermine persistence. Aligning housing options, emergency supports, and referrals with FYCSI can reduce disruptions.
- 4. Align FYCSI with other supports serving foster youth at CUNY:** Strong coordination across coaching, last-dollar, and flexible funding models can help students experience services as connected rather than fragmented.

Closing

FYCSI is a proven, flexible model that supports the full range of costs that make college persistence and completion possible for students with foster care experience. Data from both the FYCSI Impact Report and the Rockefeller Institute evaluation demonstrate meaningful benefits to student stability and persistence, while also pointing to opportunities for stronger outreach and campus-level implementation.

FYSA appreciates the Council's leadership and welcomes continued partnership with CUNY, the City, and state partners to ensure that students with foster care experience are able to enroll, persist, and graduate.

For questions regarding this testimony, please contact **Ashley Stagers, Director of the Fostering Youth Success Alliance**, at astagers@childrensaidnyc.org.

At the Table

Testimony of Michael Zink
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For the New York City Council
Committee on Children and Youth
Hon. Althea Stevens, Chair
Committee on Higher Education
Hon. Rita Joseph, Chair

Submitted April 28th, 2026

At the Table thanks Chair Stevens and members of the Committee on Children and Youth, as well as Chair Joseph and the Committee on Higher Education, for the opportunity to share our testimony on pathways for students with foster care experience at the City University of New York (CUNY).

At the Table is a non-profit founded in 2020 that provides long-term personalized college tutoring, advising, and wraparound support including housing and benefits navigation and emergency funding to 160 students with foster care experience. We are led in this work by a board of directors majority composed of people with lived experience of foster care. We never reject or eject students based on their grades, academic standing, age, or how or when they left foster care; the majority of the students we serve are formerly in foster care by the time we start working with them.

While studies from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago estimate that just 8¹-12%² of college-enrolled students with lived experience of foster care go on to earn 2 or 4-year college degrees, over 50% of the students who enrolled with At the Table between Fall 2020 and Spring 2022 have already completed their degrees³, and we expect that over 60% ultimately will. These results are a testament to the immense importance of connecting young people who have been in foster care to the community of support that *all of us* need and deserve.

¹ <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/foster-youth-not-receiving-needed-supports-from-community-colleges/>

² <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1521025118791776>

³ See our 2025 Annual Report for more information: <https://atthetable.org/annual-reports>

At the Table works closely with the Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI) program at CUNY, where 85% of our students attend, and we are the higher education training partner for Fair Futures. I previously led the Educational Services Department at The Foundling, where we helped launch the Dorm Project, the program that became College Choice.

These new programs represent great progress, but there remain major opportunities for growth, which we will outline below.

Reducing Disparities in Support Between Students Currently and Formerly in Care

There is an immense gap in the quantity of support available to students currently in foster care versus students formerly in foster care. To give one example, the College Choice program excludes any student who leaves foster care prior to enrolling in the program. This means that if a student ages out of foster care before they are able to start attending college, or is adopted at the age of 17 and attends college at 18, they are fully and permanently ineligible for tens of thousands of dollars in funding. While FYCSI is a critical resource for students who have left foster care, it is funded at a fraction of College Choice.

We offer the following recommendations:

- 1. New York City should close the funding gap for students formerly in foster care.** Whether by extending College Choice eligibility to anyone in foster care at 16 and up or by matching state funding for CUNY's FYCSI program (or both), the City should work to ensure that no one has to choose between achieving permanency and being able to afford college. Based on what students have shared with us about their respective experiences with FYCSI and College Choice, we believe greater support for the FYCSI program would be the best place to start.
- 2. The City should work with CUNY to increase staffing levels in CUNY's FYCSI program.** CUNY's FYCSI program is well-regarded by students and highly impactful on a dollar-for-dollar basis, while serving any student who was in foster care at age 13 and up, irrespective of their age or current foster care status. The success of this program currently hinges on the efforts of one outstanding individual, Shirley de Peña, who serves as its director and sole full-time staff person. College Choice, on the other hand, invests nearly \$2 million annually in staffing for its contract partner at The New York Foundling, in addition to the salaries of the ACS staff who manage and oversee the program. Funding *at least* two additional full-time staff in the CUNY FYCSI program would, at a comparatively minor cost, vastly increase the sustainability of the program and its bandwidth to support students formerly in foster care.
- 3. College Choice, not FYCSI, should take financial responsibility for CUNY student housing costs for College Choice program participants.** Currently, the FYCSI

program pays dorm costs for College Choice participants living at the CSI, CCNY, or Queens College Dorms, while College Choice pays when students elect to live at one of the off-campus partners such as Outpost Club and the 92nd Street Y. **When FYCSI pays dorm costs for College Choice students, limited state funding dollars are being diverted to ACS at the expense of students no longer in foster care.** Instead, College Choice should pay for their own students' housing at the CUNY dorms and FYCSI should increase stipends for students who do not have access to College Choice support.

4. **ACS and its contract agencies should communicate proactively with students about how their permanency options will affect their eligibility for college funding.** ACS should develop and disseminate a clear one-page explainer that informs students about the eligibility criteria and funding levels for the major college funding programs for students currently and formerly in foster care, including FYCSI, College Choice, and ETV. This information should be shared with students during permanency planning and in all final discharge conferences, posted and updated on the ACS website, and broadcast via all means available to ACS.
5. **City Council should invest in independent nonprofits that support students through and after the transition out of foster care.** Organizations like [City Living](#), [Inspiring Futures](#), and [At the Table](#) play important roles in positioning college-aged students formerly in foster care (who far outnumber college-age students currently in care) for success inside and outside the classroom, including connecting them to housing, health and mental health supports, benefits, direct funding, and programs like FYCSI. These organizations serve people with foster care experience citywide, and consequently have only a small footprint in each CM's district, which is an impediment to winning discretionary funding from individual CMs. If the Council is interested in meeting young people where they would otherwise fall through the cracks, increasing funding in the Transition-Aged Foster Youth initiative for nimble and responsive independent nonprofits would be a useful step forward.

Improving Accessibility of ACS College Choice Funding

The 2022 consolidation of ACS's Dorm Project, Fostering College Success Stipend, and College Room and Board programs into the College Choice program represented, for the most part, a great improvement in the amount and flexibility of support available to students in ACS foster care. College Choice funding has opened up options for students to attend a wide range of schools previously inaccessible to them, including HBCUs like Howard University and Spelman College, out-of-state public colleges like Penn State, and others, while the increased \$60/day stipend has dramatically reduced pressure on program participants to work while in college.

Despite these strong strengths, there remain major areas for improvement in the administration of College Choice. In our direct work with students in the program, and in our training and consultation work with foster care education staff across the city, three consistent themes emerge:

1. **Documentation requirements for College Choice unnecessarily burden students and the support staff working with those students.** New York State's ETV program has an independent contractor that verifies student eligibility directly with each college where they attend. Meanwhile, College Choice students are each individually screenshotting their schools' academic calendars to upload as PDFs alongside their bursar bill, enrollment verification letter, course schedule, unofficial transcript, and ETV award letter.
2. **Academic progress requirements and semester limits imposed by College Choice are too restrictive.** To give one example, the program now requires all participants to earn at least 65% of their attempted credits starting in their very first semester, a separate and higher academic progress standard than required by TAP and Pell grants. A student who takes 5 classes, withdraws from 2, and earns Bs in 3 would be in good academic standing in college, but could find themselves on College Choice probation.
3. **Delays in payment and gaps in communication with students, support staff, and colleges create anxiety and imperil students' course registration.** Students and their coaches and college specialists persistently find themselves in the position of pushing and reminding College Choice staff to issue payments, while at the same time assuring landlords and college bursars that funding is on its way. This dynamic contributes to burnout for staff and distracts attention from the student's academic success.

We offer the following recommendations:

1. **College Choice should use its administrative capacity to obtain needed documents directly from colleges.** At minimum, College Choice staff should be responsible for obtaining academic calendars for College Choice students, as these documents are publicly available on college websites. Better still, a CUNY-ACS MOU for enrollment verification and an information sharing agreement with the New York State ETV program to verify ETV awards would vastly reduce the burden on students and staff.
2. **College Choice should streamline its documentation requirements.** Opportunities for reducing the documentation burden on students even without an MOU or data sharing agreement include but are not limited to the below:
 - a. **Stop requiring unnecessary bursar bills:** Currently, the College Choice program requires each student to submit a bursar bill from their college,

irrespective of whether the student is requesting that College Choice issue payment to their school. In fact, most students will never need College Choice to pay their school, as their tuition and fees are fully covered by financial aid, but if College Choice is not satisfied with the condition of their bursar bill (for instance, if their FAFSA is still pending verification), the student's application will be considered incomplete anyway and their stipend will be delayed. **Bursar bills should only be required if the student needs College Choice to make a payment to their school, and a missing bursar bill should never be a reason to delay a student's stipend.**

- b. **Stop requiring duplicative proof of enrollment:** College Choice requires each student to submit their college schedule, their unofficial transcript, and an enrollment verification letter, when in fact any of these documents could fairly be used to verify a student's enrollment and full-time status. Furthermore, many colleges do not issue proof of enrollment letters until after the end of the add/drop period for courses, which means that many students' College Choice funding is placed in an anxiety-inducing limbo for the first several weeks of each semester, even when the student has already submitted their schedule and/or an unofficial transcript showing their current enrollment.
- c. **Stop requiring college academic advisors to sign academic plans:** When students fall short of the College Choice academic requirements, they may appeal to maintain their funding on a probationary basis, and part of this process is to create an "academic plan" showing how they intend to improve. The College Choice program currently requires that students' academic plans be signed by their college academic advisor. This requirement seems to be based on a fundamental misapprehension of the role and capacity of a college academic advisor; at CUNY, academic advisors are responsible for hundreds of students each, and exist almost exclusively to assist in selecting courses, not in developing plans to improve academic performance (they almost invariably do not know their students well enough to contribute meaningfully to such a plan). Removing this requirement, or allowing the plan to be signed by a coach, college specialist, or another person who is genuinely engaged in the student's plans to improve their academic performance, would save College Choice students countless hours chasing their college advisors for a hollow sign-off.
- d. **Stop requiring diplomas to begin post-graduation stipends.** Recognizing the financial challenges that attend the transition from college, College Choice promises students that it will continue offering the \$60/day stipend for 6 months after graduation. However, even when presented with a final transcript reflecting that the student has graduated, ACS will delay the

post-graduation stipend until they are given a copy of the student's diploma, which sometimes does not arrive for months after graduation. This has created funding gaps for some of At the Table's graduates during a transitional period in which they need support the most.

3. **College Choice academic requirements should be loosened, particularly for first-year students.** Students who fall afoul of College Choice's academic standards, which require students to earn 65% of attempted credits and a 2.0 GPA from their first semester in college, are placed on "College Choice probation" and must submit academic plans that are evaluated by the College Choice team for continued eligibility in the program. Decisions on whether to accept students' appeals for continued funding are made according to criteria that are not entirely clear to students and support staff, and are not always issued in a timely fashion. At the Table is aware of several cases in which dorming-away students were informed of their inability to continue College Choice supports as they were making arrangements to return to campus for the new semester; these students had not been academically dismissed from their colleges, but were unable to afford continued attendance due to the withdrawal of support. We recommend that College Choice, at minimum, align its academic requirements with the SAP and pace-of-progression requirements commonly used at CUNY schools⁴, which scale up as students progress through college.
4. **College Choice should stop counting summers toward its semester limits and loosen requirements for year-round housing.** College Choice's official materials advertise that students can participate in the program for 9 semesters while earning their associate degree and 15 semesters while earning their bachelor's degree. However, if a student remains in student housing over the summer, as opposed to returning to a foster home, College Choice counts this as a full semester toward the 9 or 15-semester limit, even though the summer term is (1) not a semester and (2) generally about half as long as a college semester. Furthermore, College Choice conditions students' year round housing on their participation in college courses or an approved summer activity, which has created difficulty for students who cannot enroll in summer courses (i.e. who are in the process of transferring between 2-year and 4-year programs) or who wish to visit family or rest after a stressful semester. Summer terms should not count towards a student's semester limit, and there should be greater flexibility given in how they are spent.
5. **College Choice should work to reduce delays in issuance of stipends, promise to pay letters, and college payments.** These delays have become a fact of life for students in College Choice and the staff who support them. ACS should gather information from students and agency staff on the issues they are having with

⁴ See here for one example:
<https://www.cuny.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/2025-07/Satisfactory%20Academic%20Progress%20Standards.pdf>

payment timeliness, host an open forum to hear concerns, and convene a working group of program participants, agency education staff, and ACS staff to identify solutions to the root causes of the delays.

Sharing Information on College Outcomes for Students with Foster Care Experience

At the Table strongly supports more robust information sharing on the college outcomes of students with foster care histories in College Choice, in FYCSI, and in the CUNY system. While the briefing document for this hearing shared statistics taken from a recent meta-analysis on college outcomes for students in foster care nationwide⁵, the most robust data sets in that analysis came from longitudinal studies of youth currently and formerly in the foster systems in just two areas of the country that are quite different from New York City: Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin (the Midwest Study) and California (CalYOUTH).

CUNY and ACS should be required to annually publish data on GPAs, course pass rates, college persistence rates, and graduation rates for College Choice participants and FYCSI participants. These datasets, if shared publicly, would be important contributions to the too-limited body of knowledge about college outcomes for students with foster care histories, and would serve as crucial accountability tools for the systems through which so many resources for students are being directed.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer this written testimony. For any questions, please reach out to me at: mike@atthetable.org

⁵ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/23328584251331454>



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New York City Council Committee of Higher Education

Testimony of Akkeem Polack, Chairperson of the CUNY University Student Senate & CUNY Trustee

April 28, 2026

Good afternoon Chairs and members of the Committee on Higher Education,

My name is Akkeem Polack, Chairperson of the CUNY University Student Senate and a CUNY Trustee, representing more than two hundred and forty thousand students across twenty six campuses.

The University Student Senate is the official representative body of CUNY students and exists to elevate student voices directly to policymakers. That responsibility includes advocating for students who are too often overlooked, including current and former foster youth across the CUNY system.

Students with foster care backgrounds are part of the broader CUNY student body, yet many enter college without the family financial support, housing stability, or emergency safety nets that other students may rely on. They are often expected to navigate higher education while also managing basic survival needs. From a student governance perspective, this is not about special treatment. It is about equitable access to the same opportunity every student deserves.

We know students do better when they have consistent, high touch support systems. Across CUNY, programs such as SEEK, ASAP, and ACE have demonstrated that students succeed when they are connected to advising, mentorship, and people who understand their circumstances. For students who have already experienced instability, trusted relationships and consistent support can be just as important as financial assistance.

Housing stability must also be recognized as a student success issue. USS has consistently highlighted housing insecurity and unmet basic needs as barriers to retention and graduation. For current and former foster youth, year round housing can often mean the difference between persistence and stopping out.

Transportation affordability is a major barrier for current and former foster youth. Without family or financial support, many students risk missing class, advising, and essential services if they cannot afford transit. As we discuss pathways for foster youth, access must come first. That is why the University Student Senate urges support for the USS OMNY Pilot and CUNY's seven hundred thousand dollar request for a free transit and OMNY card pilot. This is an investment in student access, stability, and retention.

This need for coordinated support has also been recognized beyond CUNY. In the 2022 Center for an Urban Future report, *City of Aspiration: 150 Ideas for Building a More Equitable NYC*, leaders highlighted the importance of creating private sector internships for transition age youth, noting that young adults currently or formerly in foster care face disproportionately high unemployment and housing instability. That recommendation reinforces a broader truth: when systems invest in stability, access, and targeted support, outcomes improve.

The University Student Senate urges the Council to continue prioritizing current and former foster youth in higher education, support stronger coordination between CUNY, ACS, and housing systems, elevate foster youth needs within broader student basic needs discussions, and recognize programs like FYCSI as models of what works when institutions collaborate.

Thank you.





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***New York City Council Committee of Higher Education
Testimony of Daniel Reden, Former Chairperson of the CUNY University Student Senate &
Former CUNY Trustee
April 28, 2026***

Good afternoon Chairs and members of the Committee on Higher Education,

My name is Daniel Reden. I am a former Chairperson of the CUNY University Student Senate. But today I am not here primarily in that capacity. I am here as someone who was an Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI) student. I am here because I lived what this program does and I want this Council to understand what that actually means.

I entered CUNY as a current foster youth. I did not have a family to call when things got hard. I did not have someone to help me figure out financial aid, or a place guaranteed to me over the summer, or anyone who already knew my story before I walked through a door. What I had was FYCSI. And that made a difference that I am not sure I can fully put into words, but I will try.

What FYCSI gave me was not just a resource. It was a relationship. There was someone who knew my name, who knew my circumstances, and who I did not have to re-explain myself to every single semester. For students like me, that continuity is everything. When you have spent years moving between systems, between placements, between people who were supposed to be responsible for you, the experience of someone actually staying and actually being there the next time you show up is not a small thing. It is the thing.

I also know what it feels like to weigh whether you can afford the subway against whether you make it to an advising appointment. I know what it means to wonder where you will be living when the semester ends. These are not abstract policy questions for me. They are decisions I had to make, and they are decisions thousands of CUNY students with foster care backgrounds are making right now.

What I can tell this Council, from my own experience and from what I heard from students during my time leading the USS, is that the students who make it through are almost always the ones who had someone in their corner who understood their specific circumstances. Not a general helpline. Not a pamphlet. A person. A program. A consistent point of contact that treated their instability as a solvable problem rather than a personal failing.

FYCSI is that program. It works because it is built around what foster youth actually need, not



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what is easiest to administer, but what produces real outcomes for real students. I am proof that when the right support exists and is accessible, students from foster care backgrounds can not only persist, they can lead.

I urge this Council to continue its attention to programs like FYCSI, to support the cross-agency coordination that makes these programs possible, and to recognize that foster youth in higher education are not a footnote in a broader equity conversation. We are the reason that conversation needs to happen at all.

Thank you.



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***New York City Council Committee of Higher Education
Testimony of Fatima-Zahara Kamil, Vice Chair for International Student Affairs,
University Student Senate***

April 28, 2026

Good afternoon Chairs and members of the Committee on Higher Education,

My name is Fatima-Zahara Kamil, and I serve as the Vice Chair for International Student Affairs in the CUNY University Student Senate, representing international, immigrant, and undocumented students across our campuses.

As an international student myself, I understand what it means to navigate higher education while balancing financial pressure, uncertainty, and limited access to opportunities. Many of the students I represent face even greater barriers not because they lack potential, but because systems were not designed with them in mind.

While today's hearing focuses on foster youth, I want to highlight that many of these challenges, including financial instability, housing insecurity, and lack of consistent support, are also deeply shared by immigrant and undocumented students.

Students face limited access to financial aid, barriers to internships and career pathways, and mental health challenges tied to uncertainty. Yet despite all of this, they continue to show up, succeed academically, and lead within our communities.

CUNY has opened doors for so many of us. But to truly fulfill its mission, we must ensure those doors remain open and accessible to all students.

I respectfully urge the Council to expand financial and emergency support, create more inclusive career pathways, and strengthen campus support systems that are culturally responsive and accessible regardless of status.

I have seen firsthand how simply feeling seen and supported can transform a student's journey. Investing in these students is not just about equity. It is about investing in the future of New York City.



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Thank you for the opportunity to testify.



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***New York City Council Committee of Higher Education
Testimony of Josiah Ramesar, Vice Chair for Graduate Affairs,
CUNY University Student Senate***

April 28, 2026

Good afternoon Chairs and members of the Committee on Higher Education,

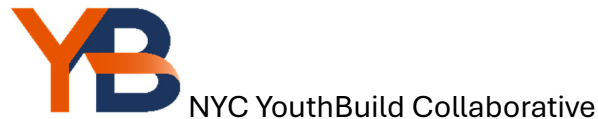
My name is Josiah Ramesar, and I am an outgoing at the CUNY School of Law. I am the Vice Chair for Graduate Affairs in the CUNY University Student Senate. In my internship with the Legal Aid Society Juvenile Rights Practice, I worked with youth who were directly impacted by the foster care system.

I interviewed youth who told me their experiences in the foster care system, and they are all bright individuals who have a strong future ahead. What the youth in the foster care need is more support after they age out of the system.

The housing support for youth aging out of foster care is essential. We don't need any more youth aging out of foster care and going into homelessness. I recall a shocking stat that last year over 150K children in NYC were homeless.

Education is a driving force that can change someone's life. Investing more into housing programs for foster care youth going forward is necessary. Investing in CUNY students who went through the foster care system is necessary.

Thank you for your time.



Testimony of Adam Reyes before NYC Council Committee on Children and Youth

April 28, 2026

Dear Chair Althea Stevens and Members of the Committee,

My name is Adam Reyes, and today I want to talk about what being part of the DREAMS YouthBuild program means to me.

Before I joined this program, I didn't really have a clear direction. Like a lot of people my age, I was just trying to figure things out—what I wanted to do, who I wanted to be, and how to actually get there. And honestly, that can feel overwhelming.

But being part of DREAMS YouthBuild changed that for me.

This program didn't just give me something to do—it gave me real opportunities. I've been able to earn certifications like OSHA, work toward my licenses, and get into culinary training. I'm also on my way to getting my NCCER certification. These are things I can actually use to build a future for myself.

But what really means the most to me isn't just the certifications—it's how I've grown.

This program helped me build discipline, responsibility, and confidence. It made me take myself more seriously and realize I'm capable of more than I thought. And I've seen the same thing happen to other people here too. People come in unsure, maybe even struggling, and over time they start to find their path and push themselves to do better.

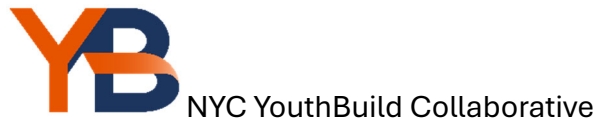
It's not always easy. There are challenges, and some days are harder than others. But that's part of it. You learn how to stay committed and keep going even when things aren't perfect.

And the environment here really matters. The staff actually care. They want to see us succeed, and having people like that around you makes a big difference.

To me, DREAMS YouthBuild isn't just a program. It's a second chance, a support system, and a way to move forward in life.

I'm grateful to be part of it, and I believe programs like this should keep growing and helping more people, because it really does change lives.

That is why we're asking for \$2.1 million for NYC YouthBuild programs.



Testimony of Ethan Colon before NYC Council Committee on Children and Youth

April 28, 2026

My name is Ethan Colon. I'm from Bronx and I want to share how the Youth Action Youth Build program has impacted my life and our community.

YouthBuild programs give young adults a real second chance. We are asking for \$2.1 million in city funding to support YouthBuild programs citywide.

I first heard about YouthBuild from my mom after she saw a flyer in our building. I decided to give it a chance and that decision changed everything. At YouthBuild, I found a community of peers and instructors who truly cared about my success. That support made a real difference for me. Through job fairs and college visits, YouthBuild connected me with real opportunities. So far, I've passed two GED exams and earned certifications in OSHA, NCCER, HVAC, and plumbing. At one point, it felt like I was running out of chances but YouthBuild gave me another opportunity and I'm grateful for the doors it has opened.

I know there are many more students like me who will benefit from this program. As a young man who has benefited from being able to access a YouthBuild program- I would like the same opportunity for other young people like me and that's why I urge the council to provide the needed funding to support YouthBuild programs across NYC. Thank you.

April 28, 2026

My name is Fatoumata Drame, and I would like to thank Chair Stevens, Chair Joseph, and members of the Committees on Children and Youth and Higher Education for the opportunity to share my experience with College Choice.

I was raised in the Bronx and began my college journey in 2021 through the College Choice program offered by The New York Foundling. I enrolled at Lehman College, where I initially pursued psychology before transitioning to social work in 2023.

Last year, I graduated from Lehman College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Work. Currently, I work at Children's Aid at the Fairmont Community School in the Bronx, where I support the afterschool program focusing on attendance and youth engagement.

During my time in the College Choice program, I received a wide range of support services that played an important role in helping me succeed in college. These supports included:

- Financial assistance, including support for books
- Academic tutoring
- Workshops focused on resume building, career counseling, and professional development

Throughout my college experience, I also received ongoing coaching, encouragement, and guidance from program staff. When I reflect on the impact College Choice had on my life, I think about how the program helped me stay on track academically and successfully complete my degree.

Beyond academics, the program supported my personal growth and character development. I developed greater confidence in asking for help and advocating for myself. The staff also helped me to strengthen my communication skills by providing practical tools, mentorship, and consistent support.

I strongly recommend programs like College Choice for students who need additional support while navigating college. I believe there is tremendous value in having a consistent support system available throughout all four years of a student's college journey.

Looking ahead, I plan to continue my education and pursue an advanced degree, either in social work or nursing.

Thank you again for allowing me to submit my story and for your commitment to supporting students and young adults as they pursue higher education and long-term success.

Testimony of McKeema Wallace
Hunter College Student, Class of 2026
The City University of New York
New York City Council Higher Education and Children and Youth Committees Hearing
“Strengthening CUNY Pathways for Current and Former Foster Youth”

April 28, 2026

Good morning, Chairs Joseph and Stevens and members of the Higher Education and Children and Youth Committees. My name is McKeema Wallace, and I am a proud member of the Hunter College Class of 2026. If someone had asked me years ago where I believed I would be today, I never would have imagined standing here as a college graduate. That is why I want to share my story.

When I first became a ward of the State, I had no clear vision of what my future would look like. Much of my childhood was spent searching for love, acceptance, and stability. Moving through multiple foster homes meant constantly adjusting to other people’s lives, routines, and families. I rarely felt a true sense of belonging. I often felt temporarily, as though everything around me could disappear at any moment. After experiencing so much instability, that feeling became my reality.

There were times when I felt unvalued, unwanted, and without the security every child deserves. The stability I longed for did not arrive during some of the hardest moments of my life. That pain led me down difficult paths and unhealthy coping mechanisms. My mind was not in a place where school felt possible or important.

During this period, I experienced moments where I felt I had to use my body to survive, and I struggled with substance use as I tried to cope with everything I had been through. That time was painful and complex.

But, God had other plans for me.

I began by working toward my GED. It was not easy. It took time, determination, and perseverance, especially with limited resources and support. Nevertheless, I accomplished my goal and earning my GED became the first step toward changing my life.

Through my foster care agency, Graham Windham, I was introduced to Alex Perez, who connected me to the Dorm Project. That program became life-changing for me. For the first time, I found not only academic support, but also confidence in myself. I became part of a community of people who understood struggle yet were striving for something greater.

When I first started college at Queensborough Community College in the fall of 2016, I had a difficult time. I was dealing with overwhelming circumstances that made it hard for me to stay focused and present in my classes, and I was faced with an impossible reality: continuing my education required a level of stability I didn't yet have, but leaving school meant returning to a foster home, a transition that left me feeling unsettled and unsure I could continue. I did what I thought was right for me at the time and made the difficult decision to stop attending school one year later, in the fall of 2017. With the help of my foster care caseworker, I entered supportive housing and received a housing voucher, which provided stability but also made the decision to pause my education feel final. Taking that break from school left me feeling as though I had

failed. I did not think I could go back, especially after starting and stopping so many times, and I believed I had reached the limit of support available to me.

I remember wishing I had finished my classes instead of withdrawing. I had programs like College Discovery and access to the kinds of support every college student needs, and I worried that once I left, I would not have that support again. But when I came back in the spring of 2020, this time at Bronx Community College, FYCSI was there waiting for me with open arms. Even when I was no longer eligible for certain programs, FYCSI made sure I did not lack the support I needed.

Even then, I was afraid.

Afraid to fail, afraid that I was not enough. However, Shirley de Peña would not allow those fears to define me. She showed up for me in every possible way, just as she has done for so many others. She made sure we had what we needed, from basic necessities to emotional and academic support. She believed in us when we could not yet believe in ourselves.

Programs like FYCSI gave me strength and confidence throughout my educational journey. While balancing work and life's many hardships, school became my safe place. One of my greatest fears was my age and the feeling that I was running out of time. But FYCSI taught me that no matter what life places in front of you, you keep going. I have withdrawn and returned to school more times than I can count. I often joke that I may be the first "super senior" I know, but what that truly represents is resilience.

Alongside FYCSI, At The Table also supported me, where Mike, Ashia, and my tutor, Heather, each played an important role in my growth. I would also like to recognize Youngin Shin, a caseworker at City Living, whose consistent support has made a meaningful impact on my life. Together, these programs and individuals created a powerful community around me – one rooted in commitment, care, and belief.

Through all of this, I discovered my passion for social work. I want to give back in the same way others gave to me. I want to be like Shirley. I want to be part of a life-changing program that supports others, believes in them, and helps them see their own potential.

I am proud to say that I earned my associate degree from Bronx Community College, where I made the Dean's List twice. Today, I stand as the first college graduate in my family.

There were many moments when life felt dark and uncertain. Even recently, during a difficult move, I did not know how I would manage financially. Before I had to search elsewhere for help, my FYCSI stipend arrived right when I needed it most. Time and time again, this program has shown up for me. Because of that support, I have not had to worry about educational support or carrying every burden alone.

That is why I want to sincerely thank the State and CUNY for investing in programs like FYCSI. These are not simply programs, they are lifelines. They prove that change is possible, success is achievable, and no one has to do it alone. Everyone

deserves this kind of support, belief, and opportunity. FYCSI gave me that, and it changed my life forever.

And Shirley, thank you for everything you have done for me. I have always looked at you as a mother figure and deeply admired the woman you are.

You taught me that the beginning of my story does not determine how it ends. When I doubted myself, you reminded me that I am greater than my circumstances. Your patience, kindness, honesty, and accountability pushed me to keep going.

You saw potential in me long before I could see it in myself. I am truly grateful that God placed you in my life, because you always saw my future beyond my present challenges.

Thank you, CUNY. Thank you, Shirley. I will always carry your guidance with me, and I will always strive to make you proud.

Thank you.

April 28, 2026

Thank you Chairs Rita Joseph, Althea Stevens and members of the Higher Education and Children and Youth Committees for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record about my experience with the College Choice program. My name is Patrice Delice, and I am honored to share my story. I often speak with new foster parents and others about my journey because I hope it can inspire young people in care and highlight the importance of the supports that help foster youth succeed.

I am a former foster youth. I was born and raised in Brooklyn, and for much of my childhood I experienced significant instability, moving from home to home. Like many young people in foster care, that instability made it difficult to feel secure and plan for my future.

Thankfully, I was eventually placed in a safe and stable home where I remained for nearly ten years. That consistency changed my life. It gave me the opportunity to focus on school, build relationships, and begin thinking about what was possible for my future.

After graduating from high school, I earned my Associate's degree in Business Administration from Borough of Manhattan Community College. Today, I am in my final year at Baruch College, majoring in Finance, with the goal of becoming an investment banker.

As I began my college journey, I was connected to The New York Foundling through its College Choice program and later through supportive housing services, where I currently live in Harlem. These programs have been instrumental in helping me succeed.

College Choice provided the kind of support that many young people aging out of foster care need but often do not have access to on their own. The program offered tutoring, academic and career advising, guidance navigating financial aid, and professional development opportunities such as career fairs. Navigating college while learning to live independently is challenging, and I cannot imagine having to do it without that support. The program allowed me to focus on my education and stay on track toward my goals.

Supportive housing has also been critical to my success. Having a place of my own has given me stability, privacy, and the ability to create a home environment where I can thrive. During my transition out of foster care, receiving assistance with furniture and rent made a tremendous difference. In addition, the location of my housing has made it easier for me to commute to both school and work, removing barriers that could otherwise make it harder to continue my education.

Because of these supports, I have been able to keep moving forward and continue building the future I have worked so hard to achieve.

My story is an example of what is possible when young people leaving foster care have access to stable housing, educational support, and caring adults who invest in their success. I urge the New York City Council to continue supporting and investing in programs that help foster youth transition successfully into adulthood.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and for your commitment to supporting young people in foster care and those aging out of the system.

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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in favor in opposition

Date: 4/28/2026

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Name: Ira Mendez

Address: Deputy Commissioner, Family Permanency Services

I represent: Administration for Children's

Address: Services

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I represent: Children's Aid

Address: 1 Edgewater Street Ste 530

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Name: Nubia Fields

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I represent: Children's Aid

Address: 317 Lenox Avenue

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Name: Daniel Rechen

Address: 410 Satter Avenue

I represent: CUNY University Student Senate

Address: 205 E 42nd St.

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Name: Shirley de Pena, PH.D., LSW

Address: CUNY - 205 East 42nd Street

I represent: Director, Foster Youth College

Address: Success Initiative

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Name: Sonia Gonzalez

Address: Executive Director of the Office of

I represent: College Success Initiatives

Address: Administration for Children's Services

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Name: Jasiyah Gilbert

Address: _____

I represent: Legal Aid Society JRP

Address: _____

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Name: Jaclyn Goodman

Address: _____

I represent: Legal Aid Society JRP

Address: _____

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Date: 4-28-2026

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Name: McKeema Wallace

Address: 505 N st yankees 10707

I represent: FyCSI

Address: _____

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Name: Ethan Colon

Address: 1594 Union Port Road

I represent: YAYB

Address: _____

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(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Najmah Nicole Abraham

Address: _____

I represent: Youth Build

Address: _____

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Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jayla Castro

Address: _____

I represent: Youth Build

Address: _____

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Name: Adam Reyes

Address: _____

I represent: Dreams Youthbuild

Address: _____

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Name: Mamoudou Diomande

Address: 854 Myrtle Ave Brooklyn, NY 11206

I represent: University Student Senate

Address: 555 W 57th St

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Name: Bonnie Langer

Address: 44 Riverview Rd, Irvington, NY

I represent: The New York Foundling 10533

Address: 590 Sixth Avenue, NY, NY 10011

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(PLEASE PRINT)
Name: Michael Zink
Address: 266 W 37th St Fl 19 New York NY
I represent: At The Table
Address: 266 W 37th St Fl 19

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(PLEASE PRINT)
Name: Unique Pérez
Address: 67-35 112th St. Forest Hills, NY, 11233
I represent: Forestdale inc.
Address: _____

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(PLEASE PRINT)
Name: Alexis Alvarez
Address: 67-35 112th St
I represent: Forestdale
Address: 67-35 112th St

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(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Wendie Amiel

Address: 57 Wiloughby St.

I represent: JCCA

Address: _____

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Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Rashad Pierce

Address: 57 Wiloughby St

I represent: JCCA

Address: _____

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(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Klo Vinson

Address: 57 Wiloughby St.

I represent: JCCA

Address: _____

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Date: 4/28/2026

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Josiah Ramesar

Address: _____

I represent: CUNY USS

Address: 555 W 57 St

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Daniel Reden

Address: 555 W BMW Building 57th Street

I represent: CUNY USS

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Akkoem Polack

Address: 555 W 57th Street

I represent: CUNY USS

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 4/28/26

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Lorraine Guzman Camastra

Address: 67-35 112 St, Forest Hills Ny 11375

I represent: Forestdale Inc

Address: 67-35 112 St, Forest Hills Ny 11375

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Fatima-Lahara Mohammed Kamil

Address: 556 W 57th Street

I represent: CUNY CSS

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 4/28/26

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Alissa Bouse

Address: _____

I represent: Fostering Youth Success Alliance (FYSA)

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 4/28/26

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Rashad Pierce

Address: 800 the first ave

I represent: JCCA

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 4/28/26

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Klorel Vinson

Address: 60 Carlton Ave

I represent: JCCA

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms