

April 10, 2020

The Honorable Karen Bass  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Brenda Lawrence  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Paul Mitchell  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Don Bacon  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jim Langevin  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20510

**RE: Immediate Adjustments to the John H. Chafee Foster Care (Chafee) Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood in COVID-19 Relief Bill Phase IV**

Dear Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth Leaders,

We write on behalf of 54,000 foster youth, alumni, and allies who comprise the *Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Coalition* (the authors and supporters of “FSHO” S. 2803 and HUD’s Foster Youth to Independence “FYI” Initiative) to express our deep appreciation for everything you are doing to keep all Americans safe.

Please know that your tireless efforts to combat the COVID-19 outbreak are not going unnoticed. The speed with which you have worked together to advance meaningful relief through Congress is awe-inspiring. We send our prayers and best wishes that you, your staff members, and your families remain healthy and strong during this difficult time.

We understand that planning is underway for a fourth, equally impressive COVID-19 relief package. Because of the long-standing commitment of the Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth to America’s current and former foster youth, we know that you too are deeply concerned about the considerable hardship that this protracted COVID-19 response, while necessary, will levy upon our 437,283<sup>i</sup> “brothers and sisters” in foster care.

Specifically, we write to share our support for the solutions that you have offered through your “Dear Colleague” letters and to draw your attention to solutions crafted by foster youth themselves to meet the unique challenges of the 17,103<sup>ii</sup> young adults who are due to emancipate from state care this year. As you know, these barriers to success are formidable, even under the best of circumstances.

Among the former foster youth who successfully gain access to higher education, 10,000 former foster youth who live in on-campus housing and are at risk of homelessness as colleges increasingly de-populate dorms to accommodate social distancing and staff safety<sup>iiiiiv</sup>. Still more youth will be displaced from work and unable to make pay their rent temporarily. Alone and facing this crisis, former foster youth nationwide are already reporting numerous struggles through a COVID-19 survey by FosterClub including:

- 28% described their home as having a food crisis or being very low on food
- 39% indicated that they had been forced to move or fear being forced to move
- 27% had been laid off and another 40% had their hours severely cut
- 33% have less than a week’s worth of cash on hand
- 23% said they wished they had more people to help them through the crisis<sup>vi</sup>

These numbers are staggering and unforgivable. State child welfare leaders simply must find their footing and

quickly establish relief efforts for former foster youth. Thankfully, due to the efforts of the Caucus, states have at their disposal an expedient, agile tool with which to meet these emerging needs, **The John H. Chafee Foster Care (Chafee) Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood**. Thanks to Rep. Bass Chafee funding is available to assist young people through the age of 23. The flexible and universal nature of the Chafee program makes it the obvious source for a nimble, robust rapid response for current and former foster youth.

We offer five recommendations to ease the regulatory burden on states and improve synchronization of Chafee with HUD's programs to eliminate the gaps through which youth might fall into homelessness during this unprecedented national crisis:

- Lift the 30% cap on room and board in Chafee
- Extend Chafee eligibility to age 23 nationwide
- Include and pass the *Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act*
- Synchronize Chafee with HUD's Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Initiative
- Provide emergency supplemental funding for Chafee for six months

#### **RECOMMENDATION #1**

##### *Lift the statutory cap of 30% on room and board*

Alumni, led by Lisa Dickson from ACTION Ohio, reached out to the Children's Bureau on March 11, 2020 to urge the associate commissioner to issue guidance to child welfare professionals to tap the Chafee Program to meet the housing and income needs for students displaced from dorms and work study arrangements. Associate Commissioner Milner agreed that the most expedient tool **available to help former foster youth is the Chafee Act**. Dr. Milner issued a letter to child welfare professionals imploring them to consider tapping Chafee funds to meet the needs of displaced youth on March 12, 2020.

In this letter, Dr. Milner encourages states to tap the 30 percent of their Chafee allotment available for “room and board.” This averages out to roughly \$780,000 per state but because Chafee funding has lost the agility and flexibility that Congress intended it to have, much of this funding is tied up in existing contracts or otherwise allocated. **Thus, we recommend that Congress lift this cap temporarily as states deal with the COVID-19 crisis.**

#### **RECOMMENDATION #2**

##### *Automatically extend Chafee eligibility to age 23 across the U.S.*

The Family First Prevention Services Act allowed states the option of extending eligibility to age 23. Some states are not aware that they have the latitude to add this older population to their State Child and Family Services Plans and therefore, forfeit the opportunity to assist this vulnerable group of emerging adults. In order to ensure that states can adequately serve youth through the age of 23 during this national crisis, **we urge Congress to include an automatic extension of Chafee eligibility to age 23 in the emergency supplemental bill**. We also encourage Congress to allow the Children's Bureau to interpret age the way that HUD interprets age. For example, HUD's Family Unification Program is available to youth ages 18 to 24. HUD accepts referrals to the program up to a young person's 25<sup>th</sup> birthday, thereby granting an entire year of eligibility. We hope that Congress will offer HHS the same latitude so that Chafee can serve youth through their 23<sup>rd</sup> year. Similarly, a simple tweak in legislative language could allow foster youth ongoing services as they transition to independence through their 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #3**

##### *Pass the Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act (HR 4300/S 2803)*

As you know, Rep. Bass worked tirelessly with Financial Services Chairwoman Waters, Rep. Turner, Rep. Dean, and Rep. Stivers in consultation with our organizations and directly with foster youth to craft the straightforward, yet sophisticated solution to the synchronization flaws of HUD's evidence-based housing program for child welfare families and youth, the Family Unification Program (FUP) to Congress. The bill

passed the House on a voice vote on November 7, 2019 and is supported by powerful national organizations including the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the Public Housing Authority Directors Association, the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, and the Children's Defense Fund. On the same day, S. 2803, received a favorable response from both Chairman Crapo and Ranking Member Brown during a Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Hearing entitled, *Examining Bipartisan Bills to Promote Affordable Housing Access and Safety*. Committee staff have assured foster youth that the bill will pass the Senate by unanimous consent. There is no reason to delay this elegantly straightforward, bi-partisan, urgent legislation for parliamentary reasons.

We feel it is our duty to point out that the FSHO components (the time-limited nature of the resource, the elimination of geographic barriers, and the streamlined distribution mechanism) are remarkably well-matched for the agility and expediency required to meet housing needs during a national emergency. Hence, FSHO is an appropriate and necessary addition to the COVID-19 Phase IV Relief Package. FSHO offers the following streamlined services:

- a three-year Family Unification Program Housing Choice Voucher Housing to all young people leaving foster care who are at risk of homelessness, properly- timed with need
- eliminates geographic disparities by offering a “on demand” voucher to youth regardless of where they live
- offers youth the opportunity to extend the voucher by two years (for a total of five) by voluntarily participating in self-sufficiency activities.

FSHO was designed by youth to eliminate homelessness in the face of a predictable housing disruption. FSHO referrals can be perfectly timed with extended foster care and Chafee resources, giving youth and their advocates time to locate suitable apartments, employment, social connections, and educational opportunities. Once housed, a young person has access to a range of services designed to encourage and ensure their self-sufficiency once the voucher expires. In fact, quite remarkably, FSHO addresses and corrects many of the flaws of the Interagency Administration Agreement formed between HUD and the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) through the Disaster Housing Assistance Program<sup>vii</sup><sup>viii</sup> revealed by the Office of the Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security (2011) and HUD's office of Policy Development and Research (2013).

#### **RECOMMENDATION #4**

#### *Match Chafee funding to ensure the success of HUD's Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Initiative*

HUD's new FYI Initiative is the portion FSHO that was within the regulatory authority of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. After meeting with foster youth from *the Fostering Stable Housing Coalition* on March 4, 2019 and learning directly from them that providing time-limited Family Unification Program (FUP) Vouchers “on demand” anywhere in the US through HUD's Tenant Protection Fund (for which FUP is an eligible use), Sec. Carson immediately tasked HUD leadership to implement the proposal, naming it the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Initiative. HUD issued the FYI Notice (PIH 2019-20 (HA)) on July 26, 2020. Since that time, nearly 1,000 youth have received “on demand” vouchers, or just over \$4 million from HUD's Tenant Protection Account.

While HUD is prepared to spend more than \$20 million to meet the permanent housing needs of former foster youth who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, child welfare agencies have been slow to embrace this program. Consequently, and quite unnecessarily, more than 25% of former foster youth experience homelessness. The ranks of homeless former foster youth will grow in the face of this national disaster. The U.S. Children's Bureau simply must begin to support FYI with the same sense of urgency and vigor demonstrated by Dr. Carson, the HUD leadership team, regional administrators, and career staff. In fact, Dr. Carson designated the HUD Region IX Administrator, Christopher M. Patterson, a former ward of the state, Job Corp participant, and child welfare professional as the national lead on FYI. Regional Administrator Patterson is active on social media, speaks with foster youth regularly to seek their input on the program, and has traveled all over the US to ensure that PHAs and PCWAs nationwide are aware of this vital and readily

available resources for his brothers and sisters in care. Child welfare professionals nationwide must adopt this same level of commitment to FYI. Moreover, the field must take more seriously the directives given to them by this Caucus over the years to ensure the economic self-sufficiency and housing stability of children who reach adulthood alone in foster care.

Despite Congress's intent to have Chafee reach every current and former foster youth under the age of 23, all too many local public child welfare agencies are forfeiting FYI Housing Choice Vouchers on behalf of the homeless and at-risk youth in their counties because, **curiously, these agencies cannot identify a suitable funding source for independent living services current and former foster youth.**

Thus, we believe that Congress must continue to lead child welfare agencies in the right direction by overtly synchronizing Chafee funds with FYI in order to end homelessness among youth leaving care. We recommend that Congress increase Chafee funding to match HUD's Investment in FYI. HUD anticipates that the annual investment in FYI is likely to reach \$20 million in 2020. In order to assure that FYI youth receive housing counseling/case management services and one-time housing costs (e.g.: first month's rent, security deposit, utility connection fees) for each voucher holder under HUD's new FYI Initiative at a rate of \$15,000/FYI voucher over (or \$5,000/ year for three years). Thus, we recommend that Chafee Program funding be increased by \$30 million and states be required to match FYI vouchers with services and support. One simple way to reinforce their obligation is to tie Chafee funding to each FYI voucher.

#### **Recommendation #5**

*Infuse \$255 million in supplemental dollars to Chafee for unexpected housing needs, financial hardship, and social connection during social distancing*

We recommend that Congress increase Chafee funding for six months with emergency supplemental funding to states of \$255 million<sup>ix</sup> to accommodate additional youth up to age 23 and to meet various, emerging needs, generally, related to COVID-19 disruptions. An immediate infusion of funding will allow states to rapidly curb housing instability, replace lost wages, and mitigate other unanticipated disruptions related the prevention of disease spread. This funding can also be used to put into place the necessary equipment to access online learning platforms and for cell phones to keep youth connected to family, friends, and professionals. Chafee is an important tool to keep youth on the path to independence and self-sufficiency during this confusing time.

Again, we are indebted to the Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth for your willingness to provide a platform for the voice and policy ideas of foster youth and alumni. It gives us great comfort at this time of national unrest to know that you all are leading the way through this crisis. If you have any questions about these recommendations please feel free to contact Ruth White at [rwhite@nchcw.org](mailto:rwhite@nchcw.org) or 202-270-7336 or Lisa Dickson [lisa@fosteractionohio.org](mailto:lisa@fosteractionohio.org).

With admiration and appreciation,



Ruth White, MSSA  
Executive Director, NCHCW



Janelle Callahan, BA  
Director of Training & Development, ACTION Ohio

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<sup>i</sup> Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System. (2017). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2020). *Today's College Students*.

<https://postsecondary.gatesfoundation.org/what-were-learning/todays-college-students/>

<sup>iv</sup> US Government Accountability Office. (2016). *Actions Needed to Improve Access to Federal Financial Assistance for Homeless and Foster Youth*. <https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/d16343.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> Fernandes-Alcantara, A. (2019). Youth Transitioning from Foster Care: Background and Federal Programs. Congressional Research Services. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL34499.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> FosterClub. (2020). *The Coronavirus (Covid-19) Emergency: Information and assistance for young people in and from foster care*. <https://www.fosterclub.com//c19>

<sup>vii</sup> Department of Homeland Security Office of the Inspector General. (2011). *Effectiveness and costs of FEMA's Disaster Housing Assistance Program*. [https://www.oig.dhs.gov/assets/Mgmt/OIG\\_11-102\\_Aug11.pdf](https://www.oig.dhs.gov/assets/Mgmt/OIG_11-102_Aug11.pdf);

<sup>viii</sup> USHUD Policy Development and Research. (2013). *Study of Household Transition from the Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP-Katrina) Final Report*.

<file:///C:/Users/ruthw/Downloads/805654.pdf>

<sup>ix</sup> We arrive at this figure by assuming that if 17,000 youth age out per year, then there are potentially three years' worth of Chafee-eligible young people in the US at any given time or 51,000 young adults. Further we estimate that the average cost of economic assistance for these youth is \$5,000 over six months. This brings the potential cost of emergency assistance to \$255 million for six months.