



Robert E. Craven, Chair
House Judiciary Committee
State House
Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

RE: H5347, H5345, H5260

Dear Chairman Craven and members of the Judiciary Committee:

I am writing this letter in support of modifying our state statutes to expand eligibility and service duration of DCYF services for youth and young adults with foster care experiences. Each of the above-named pieces of legislation makes a critical change to Rhode Island law. While these bills may need to be combined, the key changes are ones that will make a difference to young people in our state. These changes include:

- Ensuring that children involved with DCYF for services through their juvenile justice division are equally eligible for services offered to children involved with DCYF through their child welfare division. (H5260, H5347, and H5345)
- Expanding the Voluntary Extension of Care program to youth who were reunified with their birth parents prior to their 18th birthday, when the reunification is unsuccessful. (H5260)
- Expanding the length of time services offered through the Voluntary Extension of Care from age 18-21 to age 18- 26. (H5345)

Adoption Rhode Island is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting safety, permanency, and a sense of belonging in foster and adopted children, vulnerable youth, and families through compassionate services, education, and advocacy. We have served many thousands of children and families impacted by trauma over the years in our various programs. Our programs include adoption and guardianship support, youth and young adult educational support, homelessness prevention, and housing support. Additionally, several months ago, we received our behavioral health license. We are dedicated to expanding our behavioral health services to assist the state in meeting the mental health needs of children, young adults and families impacted by child welfare and adoption. Our youth and young adult services provide numerous interventions for young people exiting foster care. Unfortunately, some of the youth “fall through the cracks” and are not eligible for services after age 18. We need to fill those cracks.

Ensuring that youth who have experienced foster care have support is crucial as it allows them the resources to achieve stability as they transition to adulthood. These needs are equally important for youth who are involved with DCYF due to a wayward petition filed in family court as they are for youth who have an abuse and neglect petition filed in court. Age 18 is too young for the state to eliminate access to services that prevent homelessness and incarceration for any youth involved with Rhode Island DCYF.

For young people who were in foster care and were placed back with their family for reunification, it is even more crucial that services are available if the reunification does not remain intact. These young people are often the ones who are couch surfing and left to fend for themselves. There have been numerous situations where a youth in this situation has asked for help and no help is available. It is heartbreaking and financially and ethically imprudent.

Lastly, extending the length of time that a young person can receive these services also increases the likelihood of achieving educational goals, remaining stably housed, and decreases risk of homelessness. Former foster youth are eligible for health insurance through age 26. California has a bill that would offer supports to youth up to age 26. Several states have extended foster care services to age 23 through the John H. Chafee Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood, following the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) of 2018, which allows states to extend Chafee services to age 23. States that have extended foster care services to age 23 include, but are not limited to: Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon.

In summary, I support changes to our statute that would address the lack of eligibility parity for our Voluntary Extension of Care program and extend the supportive services beyond age 21. These small changes can make a lifetime of difference for a young person.

Thank you for your consideration of these bills. I am happy to answer any questions. I can be reached at 401-524-3456 or dallen@adoptionri.org

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Darlene Allen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Darlene" being more prominent than the last name "Allen".

Darlene Allen, MS
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