

Chair Gelser, Vice-chair Heard, members of the committee, for the record my name is Hannah Royal and I am a former foster youth and member of Oregon Foster Youth Connection living in Benton county. I am here to speak today on the pandemic's impact on the rights and safety of youth in care. There are more than enough concerns for youth in care already, and with this pandemic came new issues in addition to these concerns. Some of the biggest concerns about how some of the policy changes around visitation and placements are being handled during this pandemic include foster youth wanting face to face contact with friends and family, parents and grandparents, difficulty getting school access for foster youth who have had to change schools during the pandemic, and delays of children going home due to parents not having access to resources due to the pandemic.

In relation to face-to-face contact with friends and family, I know that with the lifting of the stay-at-home order, some of these concerns may no longer be relevant, but others will remain, especially around family reunifications. I would, however, be cautious to say that the lifting of the stay-at-home order has allowed foster youth to visit their friends and family because we have heard that some foster parents have concerns about the health safety of visits. I would like to recommend that caseworkers work closely with foster parents to make sure that foster youth are able to visit (while social distancing) their friends and family regardless of these concerns. I know that with isolation comes restlessness, anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression, which should be of greater concern, especially for foster youth.

As a student teacher at a high school, I have also found it difficult to ensure all students are getting access to their schoolwork, but my school in particular has made accommodations for students to work without needing internet access and have extended the time frame for students to complete their coursework. I believe these accommodations would work to provide more equitable school access for foster youth as well.

With the increased strain on youth during the COVID-19 pandemic, more youth transitioning out of care are losing jobs, becoming homeless, and struggling to succeed. In order to help remedy these issues, I believe a moratorium absolutely must be placed on youth exiting care so that they may still have access to services provided by DHS during this crisis. In order to ensure young people transitioning to adulthood from foster care are able to survive the hardships caused by this crisis, increasing funding for transition-age youth programs and services must occur. Providing flexibility to key programs that aid transition-aged youth will also allow youth to be served for longer periods of time. In addition, youth should be allowed to re-enter into foster care during the crisis in order to help keep these youth safe and off the streets.