

Jamie Stockdale- Resource Parent (D1)

Good afternoon, Chair Reynolds, Vice Chairs Scharf and Nguyen, for the record my name is Jamie Stockdale, and I am a certified resource parent from Columbia County, Oregon.

I'm happy to start off this panel talking about why this work is so important.

I believe that what a foster child hopes for the most is someone who can look past their trauma and unsafe behaviors and recognize that what they are really communicating is longing for things we all crave - acceptance, belonging, understanding and tolerance, as well as reassurance that they have a voice.

What I love most about serving children in foster care is being a consistent presence for them as they navigate their ups and downs and witnessing them overcome their adversity while transforming into the amazing humans I saw them to be the first moment we met.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have known the children I've had the pleasure of serving as their resource parent, and in some cases, continuing to being a part of their lives beyond foster care.

Their resilience, strength, and determination have inspired me in ways I cannot begin to express. Witnessing their growth and development is always humbling, and I am honored to have played a role in their journey.

However, I would like to share with you today, from my perspective, some of the challenges, as well as rewards of being a resource parent, especially to high support needs foster children experiencing temporary lodging situations.

There is a lack of appropriate placement options available to support their extreme mental health and behavioral needs, as well as the intense supervision required to keep them safe.

In cases where children are in temporary lodging, we provide intense 24/7 supervision and work with community partners to navigate situations when a child becomes unsafe because they are escalated and unable to calm.

We do this while caseworkers work tirelessly to explore a higher level of care for these children which can more appropriately meet their mental health and safety needs.

The typical day as a resource parent can vary greatly, but one common factor is that we are always on-call and on high-alert, day in and day out. We never know when a child may need our help or support, and we are always ready to step-in and provide the care they require. The demands of this level of commitment and availability is emotionally, spiritually, physically exhausting, as it requires us to be consistently vigilant and responsive.

In my experience, a high needs child's behaviors can range from self-harm and suicidal behaviors to refusing to attend school and running away from their placement.

Resource homes are NOT Behavioral Rehabilitation Services programs, of which provide therapeutic environments for high support needs children and have in-house access to resources, such as, around the clock intense supervision, wraparound services and on-demand crisis intervention supports.

Currently, when I accept placement for a high support needs foster child in temporary lodging, the expectation is that I provide the level of care equal to that of a BRS program for an unknown length of time while the child's caseworker sends out multiple referrals to an actual BRS program with the hopes for an opening.

The unfortunate reality is that BRS programs are difficult to access in our state currently because options are limited and waiting lists are long.

Additionally, as a foster child waits for an opening in one of these programs, they are experiencing a chronic state of instability due to their needs not being adequately met because of overburdened mental health systems and a discouraging lack of resources, not just in Columbia County, but also in communities across Oregon.

As a resource provider serving children in temporary lodging, there is never a time when I am not emotionally, spiritually, and physically exhausted from trying to meet their needs or experiencing vicarious trauma while trying to support a child process and cope with their own. These feelings linger long after every child has left my home. There is no time for self-care in these situations because all attention and energy must be devoted to the child to keep them safe at home, in the community, at school and other environments. This takes an extreme toll on me as a resource parent, as well as my relationship with my husband, and members of my immediate and extended family.

Access to respite care has been critical to give us the opportunity to take a break and recharge so we can continue to serve children in temporary lodging in our home. Unfortunately, there is a lack of respite care services which not only affects support for children in temporary lodging, as it is a pervasive problem for all resource providers in Columbia County. Without respite care options, resource providers can become overwhelmed and isolated.

A sustainable solution for respite care is desperately needed.

Even with all the challenges my family experiences in serving foster children, especially those in temporary lodging, we are dedicated to this work and have no desire to stop because of how passionate we feel about every child in foster care having a safe and loving environment where they can focus on healing and just being a child.

Thank you for letting me explain why this is important for our community.

Carissa Ponting- Supervisor (D2)

Good afternoon, Chair Reynolds, Vice Chairs Scharf and Nguyen, for the record my name is Carissa Ponting. I am the supervisor of the teen unit in D2, Multnomah County at the East Family Services Center. Prior to this position, I was a CPS worker who investigated safety concerns on many of the high needs teen cases such as cases with a youth who is identified as being a commercially sexually exploited youth. During my time in each of these positions, I have either been a caseworker assigned to youth who were in temporary lodging or have been the supervisor overseeing cases with youth in temporary lodging.

When I told a few members of my unit that I would be speaking to you today, they said, "Tell them everything," and "Tell them the whole truth." These cases and circumstances are complex and difficult to represent how they make us all feel.

When you stay in hotels with youth, you start to build relationships with them, and they come to know the routine around when different caseworkers will be with them in the hotel. There was one young person in particular who I developed close rapport with. This youth would, at times, have very large emotional outbursts and had been known to throw rocks at staff, break items, scream, and self-harm. When I stayed with him, he would ask me every single night to read Tom Sawyer to him, and I did. We read it every night for many months. When we would finish reading a chapter, he would ask me to read it to him again, and it was this way every time I stayed with him. He also loved jumping in the pool and having me make slow-motion videos of him doing this so he could analyze his jumps to see how he could improve. He was just a kid, not unlike my own children in his hobbies. This youth wanted nothing more than to belong. He desperately wanted a family, but the department struggled to find placement because of how big his behaviors could get. During this time, I saw him fight another youth in a pool where I could not intervene, tear down a closet door and threaten to jump off a tall staircase. This is a kid I still think of often and who will never leave my memory. He is sweet, funny, smart, adventurous, and brave. Unfortunately, these strengths did not outweigh the behavioral concerns and risk resource families felt they could take on, so he lingered in TL.

As we are working with all of these systems we face enormous barriers such as placement's closing, placements who take high needs kids denying placement because behaviors are too big or not big enough, other agencies reporting they are not driven by crisis and need to take their time, disagreement about mental health diagnosis within the team, schools not providing transportation in a timely way, hospitals saying mental health isn't the problem and that behavioral health is the problem, attorney's advocating for youth to remain in hotels, and youth denying placements because they want to stay in hotels. These are all very common barriers that occur while working with youth at risk of TL or who are in TL. We negotiate ALL this while being looked at in what feels like under a microscope to see what we could be doing better, differently, or timelier while simultaneously responding to instant messages about the case, emails and phone calls from everyone while we are also in meetings and filling out all of the paperwork.

So, what does this feel like and what is the impact from this enormous amount of stress and pressure on caseworkers and supervisors negotiating Temporary Lodging Cases? Emotionally, I have had caseworkers come in my office, shut the door and cry, get angry, and vent how the pressure is negatively affecting them. I have had caseworkers say they can't sleep because they can't stop thinking about their kid in a hotel, and likewise have caseworkers complain of declining mental health because of the pressure and stress these situations bring. I have had caseworkers ask to be taken off these cases and have heard of caseworkers leaving the agency to remove themselves from all these feelings.

We hear stories in various forms of media about the problem of having youth in hotels which is then internalized by workers as shame, sadness, despair, and other such feelings. The part of the story that always seems to be missing is the process, the day-to-day management, stress, anxiety, and emotional roller coaster that workers are going through to try and do the right thing in securing placement for kids that just do not seem to exist. It is so easy to say this is a Child Welfare crisis to solve but it is bigger than that, this is a system issue that is hurting kids and the people working incredibly hard to help.

Caseworkers want what is best for kids in these difficult situations and that is why they keep showing up every single day working as hard a person can possibly work to try and problem solve through this crisis. I am very proud of the workers I supervise for their tenacity and passion for this work despite the enormous presenting challenges.

Thank you.

Geneia Maupin, Program Manager (D11)

Good afternoon, Chair Reynolds, Vice Chairs Scharf and Nguyen, for the record my name is Geneia Maupin. I am the Child Welfare Program Manager in District 11 which is Klamath and Lake counties. Our district has had a teen in temporary lodging for over a year. Logistically, this requires six staff every evening, 42 staff a week and before accounting for contracted help for day-to-day care. We have 45.5 caseworkers and 12 social service assistants in our district that can help with these shifts. Our staff have been amazing to make sure every shift is covered while continuing to do their day job.

The management of the schedule and this youth's day-to-day issues is all consuming for our teen unit. Daily they are coordinating the schedule for staff, along with daily logs that are required and the needs of this youth and his behaviors. Temporary lodging is not good for our staff and not good for this youth. The system has failed him. Essentially, this youth has 42 people parenting him which has only increased triangulation, manipulation, and attachment issues. Unfortunately, this refuses to participate in treatment will turn 18 in April. I worry what his future will bring as he is not prepared for his exit from state custody.

Sheila Wegener- District Manager (D5)

Good afternoon, Chair Reynolds, Vice Chairs Scharf and Nguyen, for the record my name is my name is Sheila Wegener and I am currently the District Manager for ODHS in Lane County. Prior to my current position I have held multiple roles with the agency including spending 8 ½ years as a caseworker, a manager for case workers in a variety of roles, an Operations and Policy Analyst with the Child Safety unit, and a Child Welfare Program Manager in Lane County. I was raised in Southern Oregon and have a strong connection to this State and my community. Throughout my childhood my parents provided shelter care to hundreds of children placed in foster care, so I have seen ODHS through multiple experiences that have had a significant influence on who I am and how I view myself as a public servant.

Today I am here to discuss the impact of TL on ODHS staff which directly impacts the families we serve. In 2023 District 5 had on average 3 youth in TL at any given time, reaching a high of 6 youth in TL in December 2023. To provide supervision of these young people for one week, it required 1,608 hours of work. Of those hours, District 5 ODHS employees provided around 69% of the supervision, staff from other state agencies and Districts provided about 12 % and contracted supports 19%.

In our County approximately 80% of supervision is provided by ODHS staff and not a contracted agency. This means our staff are working overnight and on weekends ***in addition to their normal work schedule***. Staff are exhausted, not only by the hours they commit to supervision but the relentless nature of looking for placements for high needs children; problem-solving all the issues that come with a child moving homes (transportation, medication management, visitation changes; notification to courts and attorneys, additional mandatory meetings to approve TL, etc.); addressing concerns of the youth, their families, providers, and assuring all the needs of these incredibly vulnerable youth are met.

Child Welfare cannot produce placements for children that have behaviors that are outside the scope of regular foster care; these children have been identified as needing a higher level of care for a reason. Despite the hours of meetings, coordination with treatment teams and providers, schools and behavioral health systems, the external pressure to resolve all of these things lands on the shoulder ODHS caseworkers, supervisors and managers. This effects their daily performance, their personal lives and the accumulation of this impacts our ability to support staff in feeling like they are doing their jobs well and in retaining them. For staff that do stay, many experience feelings of being overwhelmed, anxiety and exhaustion and others decide to not stay at the agency as we repeatedly hear it is not healthy to work here.

As a result of providing supervision for youth who have been identified as requiring higher levels of care, we have had multiple incidents of staff being assaulted, hotel rooms damaged or destroyed, staff experiencing fear and trauma as a result of feeling helpless to address immediate and acute safety issues such as children attempting to run into traffic or jump from a windows, youth running away and returning under the influence of unknown substances, youth expressing and exhibiting other self-harming behaviors and engaging in activities that place

themselves and those responsible for their supervision in unsafe situations. When unsafe and dangerous things happen, staff have to wait for police or paramedics to respond but often there is nothing they can do. If a youth was arrested, they are not typically held by the Juvenile Department because they are not detainable offenses. If the youth's actions require medical attention, they may be observed but are released when they are medically stable so that means the youth remain in our physical care or quickly return to our care.

Finally, in the midst of all the dynamics discussed above, each day staff are trying to provide some sense of normalcy; they get to know the youth, play games with them, take them on outings, cook dinner, watch TV, set bedtimes, and provide consistency despite all the chaos around them. Staff work together to share what interests the youth have and what may motivate them or give them hope- it is in no way a family like or stable setting for any of these youth.

There have been many conversations and discussions that TL does not meet the needs of our youth. We have met with other government agencies, community providers, treatment services and families and no one has the one answer that is going to help these youth and solve this crisis. Nearly every day I think about the fact there are youth and staff sitting across the State in hotel rooms providing for the daily care of youth with the highest needs and worry about the impact on all of them. I know that worry and concern does not provide answers and as I listen to discussions on capacity and more discussions about what is needed, I also think about how we are barely holding this together.

Cecelia "CeCe" Longo- Child Welfare Caseworker (D2)

Good afternoon, Chair Reynolds, Vice Chairs Scharf and Nguyen, for the record my name is my name is Cecelia Longo and I am a caseworker from District 2, midtown.

As an ODHS employee, I dedicate my time and energy to support the children and young adults on my caseload and in my community. My statement is not to detract from the impact on youth, but to highlight the effect on myself as an ODHS employee.

I have been an ODHS permanency worker who has had youth on my caseload in temporary lodging, and I have worked the overnight shifts. In Multnomah County, temporary lodging shifts are 15 hours long, running from 5PM to 8AM. During this time, we do activities with the youth, have dinner, chat, and help prepare for the next day. However, not every time is ideal. I have been assaulted during this time, been to the emergency room with young adults due to behavioral or emotional needs and been exposed to substances. In my experience, children with the highest needs, that are often in need of services and higher levels of care from other systems, are placed in temporary lodging.

As a permanency worker who has navigated temporary lodging for youth on my caseload, it is not easy work. We are thrust into a parenting role and the sole knowledge holder and single coordinator for all services for a young person. I have had to schedule and monitor numerous services and schedules for a child, such as occupational therapy, speech therapy, behavioral health, mentorship programs, school, Intellectual and Developmental Disability Services, and all medical appointments. When children are at home or placed in care, we are working on a team. However, when children are placed in temporary lodging that situation consumes all time and energy. Constant coordination, transportation, and direct engagement with the youth result in my other cases receiving less attention.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding temporary lodging and what I have witnessed and experienced of its impact on Oregon Department of Human Services workers.

Steven Voskanian- Child Welfare Caseworker (D11)

Good afternoon, Chair Reynolds, Vice Chairs Scharf and Nguyen, for the record my name is my name is Steven Voskanian and I am a caseworker in Klamath Falls.

Temporary lodging is never ideal. It is influenced by so many factors that are out of the department's control. The availability of placement options is never ideal. The circumstances which resulted in the TL situation are never ideal. In the end, everyone is left in the same position. Doing a disservice to the youth by being unable to provide a home-like setting that can meet their unique needs. This is not an issue that is unique to our district as it is seen across the state and across the nation. It is clear this is an issue that is systemic in nature and requires interventions by the legislature.

Managing supervision in a TL situation is a constant task which can appropriately be described as co-parenting with every employee in our office. There is a substantial amount of time spent in providing daily updates and attending meetings regarding our TL situation. We are required to provide daily TL updates to the Central Office TL team. We are also required to attend weekly meetings with the Central Office TL team and other varying participants. These meetings discuss a summary of the previous week and explores ideas or options that could potentially end this TL situation. These meetings have become a consistent source of frustration as they frequently involve repetitive questioning, repetitive topics, and perceived criticism regarding how our office is handling the situation. Some frustration surrounds comments regarding the lack of significant progress in resolving this TL situation. Some is from statements that pass judgment based on personal beliefs or are made by individuals who fail to recognize, or are unaware of, the situation's unique circumstances.

Change is needed. Change that will support the ability for Child Welfare to be capable of providing much needed support to the children and youth who find themselves living a life that exists in a hotel room.

Christine Mendiola – Child Welfare Caseworker (D3)

Hi, thank you for allowing me to provide my insights regarding temporary lodging. My name is Christine Mendiola and I have been doing temporary lodging continuously for about five years now. Though this is the last resort for the children in foster care who not have placement, placing them in hotels is better than having them sleep in ODHS Child Welfare offices or out in the streets. There has been so many challenges for the staff that provide care for the children and temporary lodging. However, I will focus on two, youth's behavior stabilization and staff's out of pocket expenses.

Most children in temporary lodging are out of a placement disruption due to behaviors. These behaviors cannot be managed by resource providers. In addition, there are times that children in temporary lodging are waiting for placements in BRS facilities. I have heard so many concerns from my peers regarding youth's behaviors while in TL. While waiting for placement, ODHS staff is expected to maintain and stabilize the youth's behavior, the best that they can. There are times that staff are fearful of their safety due to the lack of training they have. Some of the youth require higher level of care that the ODHS staff doing TL can't provide them. It will really help if there is a contracted behavioral specialist that can support this youth while they are in temporary lodging and waiting for placements. It will also be helpful if staff receives intensive training to manage such behaviors. I have yet to see a protocol of what should happen if a youth physically hurts a staff.

Another challenge that I have seen during temporary lodging is staff using their own money to purchase food or any items for the youth and then get reimbursed later. Reimbursement takes time.

Doing temporary lodging is rewarding to many caseworkers. I think there just needs to be a better process and support for children and staff.

Laura Marin- Child Welfare Caseworker (D3)

TL can be emotionally and physically exhausting. We then have to perform our full-time job aside from taking shifts. Many of us do this because we care and we want to help our colleagues or these youth. There are days where we go and TL and cancel our personal plans due to the agency needing help.

TL does not stop during holidays and special events. These youth end up spending holidays with us because sometimes we are all they have. Staff stay with these youth during holidays and takes away from their family. I have two toddlers and it's very hard to assist all the time because it takes away from my own family. In my experience we get into dangerous situations. A lot of our kids in TL have high behaviors and threaten us. We have to assist de-escalate, coach, guide and assist these youth. A lot of youth lack social skills and that is where we guide them. When staff is not consistent with following rules with these youth it makes it even harder. The agency tends to make changes all the time and it gets exhausting trying to keep up.

Kim Montgomery- Resource Parent (D4)

Good afternoon Chair Reynolds, Vice Chairs Scharf and Nguyen, for the record my name is Kim Montgomery and I am a resource parent.

Taking in a foster child at risk of entering temporary lodging is a deeply emotional and urgent responsibility. It's a mixture of compassion, urgency, and a profound sense of duty to provide stability and security to a child in need.

I'm excited to share some thoughts on what is needed to successfully parent children at risk of entering temporary lodging: Contracted in-home supports, timely mental health supports, adequate financial compensation and effective strategies and resources to manage challenging behaviors in the moment.

Contracted In-home Supports

Taking in a child or teen who is at risk of going to temporary lodging due to their high needs presents challenges for foster parents. These children often require additional attention, specialized support, and resources to thrive. Having a contracted support available to come to our home has been a vital part of whether we could maintain a placement and keep them in a family like setting or not. Contracted supports bring professional expertise and experience to the table, enabling them to assess the child's needs effectively and recommend appropriate interventions and support. They work collaboratively with us to develop and implement comprehensive care plans tailored to the child's unique requirements. These supports provide valuable guidance and resources that help foster parents navigate the complexities of caring for a child with big behaviors. They offer strategies, interventions, and resources tailored to the specific needs of the child, which can be incredibly beneficial in managing challenging situations. These supports also offer emotional support and a listening ear for us, providing reassurance, validation, and empathy during difficult times.

We have found that fostering a high needs child without the support of contracted supports has led to increased stress and feelings of isolation. Without access to the support, we have felt overwhelmed and ill-equipped to address the child's complex needs effectively. The presence of a contracted support in our home has significantly improved our experience for both high needs children and us as a foster family, providing us with the essential support needed to keep the children in a family like setting.

Timely Mental Health Services

The extensive waitlists for mental health services represent a pressing issue that demands urgent attention and resolution. As we try to get our kids into mental health support, we encounter prolonged delays before accessing essential care. Because of these extended wait times we have seen worsening symptoms, increased feelings of isolation, and heightened vulnerability to crises. Addressing these extensive waitlists will require a multifaceted approach,

including increased funding for mental health resources, expansion of mental health workforce training programs, and implementation of telehealth options for foster families.

Adequate Financial Compensation

I think it's also important to address the huge liability we take on when welcoming high needs kids in our home. We willingly shoulder immense responsibility, often navigating complex challenges and dedicating substantial resources to ensure the well-being of the children in our care. Unfortunately, our efforts are sometimes overshadowed by the looming threat of CPS assessments, which take a mental toll on the entire household. It's imperative that the system acknowledges and addresses these concerns, providing foster families with the support and assurance they need to continue offering safe and nurturing environments for children with high needs. The current compensation as a resource parent not only overlooks the financial strain of meeting the unique needs of these children but also fails to acknowledge the emotional and time-intensive nature of the caregiving role. Inadequate compensation can inadvertently discourage potential resource families from offering their homes to high-needs kids, limiting the pool of available caregivers and hindering the overall well-being and development of vulnerable children in the foster care system. Addressing this issue is crucial to ensuring that foster families are appropriately supported in their invaluable role as caretakers for children with heightened needs.

Crisis Strategies and Resources

Effective strategies and resources to manage challenging behaviors in the moment are needed. Being told to "call the police " rather than be provided with appropriate services and support for kids in our home is not an appropriate solution. While I am committed to providing a safe and nurturing environment for the children, there are instances where immediate and appropriate interventions are crucial. I would appreciate additional support and guidance on practical, in-the-moment techniques that align with the child's specific behavioral needs. Currently, we are extremely limited and that sets us up for failure.

While being a foster parent comes with its challenges, the opportunity to make a positive difference in the life of a child far outweighs its drawbacks. With support from my personal and professional networks, I am committed to navigating these impacts with resilience and dedication.

Thank you for allowing me to share solutions that would greatly improve the lives of children and families.

Jen Cranmer- Self-Sufficiency (D3)

Good afternoon, Chair Reynolds, Vice Chairs Scharf and Nguyen, for the record my name is Jennifer Cranmer, I have been providing temporary lodging supervision for our youth since 2019. I am an employee of ODHS and a labor leader with SEIU where I act as a resource to my peers when needed.

While this is rewarding work providing positive interactions for the youth in our care, it does have its challenges. Supporting youth in temporary lodging is both physically and emotionally taxing on staff, as we often times on get a few hours of sleep with the requirement to be awake around the clock, this is in addition to our assigned daily work.

Having a youth in temporary lodging is the last resort of the agency. After all the other entities had the opportunity to say “no”, we, ODHS staff, do not get that choice.

We show up selflessly, prudent parenting with dozens of co-workers, trying to help these youth with very challenging behaviors to learn how to be safe, a basic hygiene routine, healthy eating habits, responsibility of going to school, counseling, doctor, and other necessary appointments for their wellbeing.

We help them get and keep a job and assist in development of other independent living skills.

We celebrate their birthdays and preferred holidays with these youth – at times taking away from our own families.

We come alongside our youth when they are experiencing dysregulation, at times experiencing harm to those involved.

We support them get past these episodes as learning opportunities for other coping strategies.

We see some good that comes from this work providing safety, stability and accountability to these youth day in and day out.

We see their improvements and **we** feel total heartbreak when we see youth continue to struggle.

With all the support **we** give, **we** also need the support of leaders and decisions makers across the state to tackle the systemic problems that get us to this place of last resort.

Thank you.

Alyssa Shiprack - Youth

Who am I?

People ask me similar things to this all the time, "who are you"?

My breathing gets heavy and my heart hits the floor every time I hear that question.

Am I supposed to know?

What do you mean, my favorite color?

My favorite food?

How I like my coffee?

Who am I?

That question has put me in severe depression for as long as I can remember now.

Suicide attempts, self-harm, drugs, dating, trying to fill the voids this question has made.

When I was 8, I was always the one bouncing in her chair because I couldn't sit still, I dressed like I got dressed in the dark, but I didn't have a care in the world, I practiced my goofy faces in the mirror, I was a goof ball is what my father always said.

Alyssa, you're here to talk about temp lodging, what does this have to do with anything? Let me explain. I've been in over 60 placements by the time I aged out of the system.

Let that sink in. Over 60 placements.

I was never in a stable school longer than a few months.

I grew up with little to no friends.

I never could really choose how I dressed because my clothes were constantly lost or stolen between moves.

I had no stable discipline or direction from healthy adults.

I had no one I felt comfortable going to about my body, mental health, or just to have somewhere I knew I could always go, no matter what, with a porch light I always knew would be on for me.

Those very important core things that make up a person starting from such a young age were stolen from me.

Now I'm almost 19 years old with the same question echoing in my head...Who. Am. I?

Was it all the system's fault I moved so much? No.

I had severe behavioral issues, outbursts, depression, anxiety, attachment issues, I had a hard time in school.

I was not a perfect kid at any means. But I was just as deserving of stability, appropriate discipline, patience, and love than the kid who was "easier than me".

What is easy when it comes to kids anyway? I'm no parent, but raising any kid isn't easy.

Shouldn't I have been more secure and protected by the system?

Was I really a problem child or was the system creating one?

I was thrown away into facilities, mental hospitals, even out of state for 2 years because of the system.

Were these placements the best option for a child who already had so much stress already?

Getting used to a new environment over and over, I was ripped out of people's homes who loved me, over and over.

I was in hotels more than 5 times.

I felt thrown away, how do you explain to your friends you're staying at a hotel with someone you don't know?

How do you feel ok with who you are when you're the foster kid in a hotel room, just to have somewhere to sleep?

I felt worthless.

You couldn't find anyone that cared enough to let me sleep at their house for a few nights?

Maybe I am the problem, is what I thought most of the time, but I wasn't, it was my environment, as a kid I didn't understand that. I just knew no one wanted me at their house because what they saw on my record.

I wasn't what was written in my record.

They had me written down as violent, self-destructive, angry, overly emotional, suicidal, self-harm issues, attachment issues, the list goes on and on.

Anyone in my life that has stayed knows I'm far from any of those things.

Would I have had a better chance if people looked passed that? Definitely.

I am loving, helpful, creative, passionate, insightful, extremely empathetic, good with kids, adaptive, and the list goes on and on. Those lists are two different people, one a child who was hurting and now the young adult I have become.

My voice got lost a lot.

My thoughts and opinions about my life were overrun by a bunch of adults.

Everyone would be in a room talking about what I needed and what I wanted when I was right there hunched in my chair, voiceless. I would get so frustrated to the point I would scream and yell because no one was actually listening.

I acted out and what I needed was ignored.

Was there something wrong with me or how adults were responding to me?

I wanted help.

I wanted to know someone was there to help.

I wanted someone to sit down and tell me it's ok to be overwhelmed and talk me through it, just like any other kid.

But the pattern continued, I got overwhelmed, freaked out, and was moved from the placement.

Rather than working things out, the easy fix was to just move me out, give up on the situation and not think about the root cause of the problem.

Many of my issues were not solved with moving homes, I just learned how to push it down and deal with it myself.

We need to change the narrative, try a different way. Doing the same thing over and over hoping things change doesn't change anything, it's just hurting more and more kids.

I can't give you all the things that need changed in a 5-minute speech. I've been screaming to be heard for over 10 years.

Are you paying attention?

Listen to the kids.

Ask them what needs changed, they are smart, trust me.

There are many more girls and boys who are in the system right now, lonely, scared, depressed, anxious, why am I the only one up here?!

Many more stories should be heard and seen.

We are all forgotten about until you see us homeless on the streets, hooked on drugs, and then we are seen as a problem to society.

Are you listening?

Are we ready to change something? Or am I still screaming to myself?

Who am I not to say anything?

Who am I if I survived and help no one?

Who am I if nothing changes?