

MEMO

To: Joint Finance Committee

From: Marissa L. Band, Esq., on behalf of the following organizations:
Community Legal Aid Society, Inc.
State Council for Persons with Disabilities
Governor’s Advisory Council for Exceptional Citizens
Developmental Disabilities Council

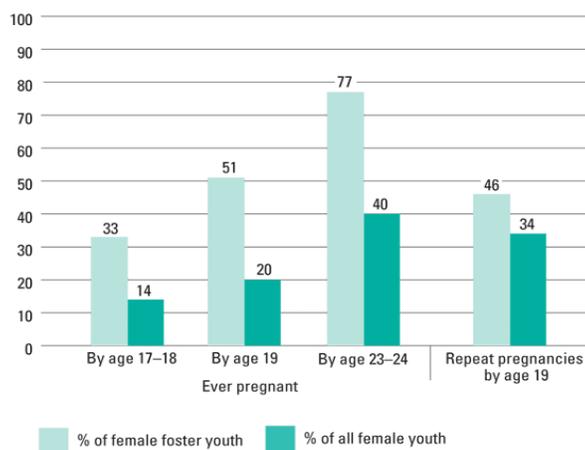
Date: February 18, 2016

RE: Division of Family Services (“DFS”) FY 2017 Budget

Please allow this document to memorialize the presentation made by Marissa L. Band, Esq., on behalf of Community Legal Aid Society, Inc.¹, the State Council for Persons with Disabilities (“SCPD”), the Governor’s Advisory Council for Exceptional Citizens (“GACEC”) and the Developmental Disabilities Council (“DDC”). We would like to focus today on funding a third cohort of youth to receive DFS’s ready by 21 ASSIST stipend.

I. Teenagers Exiting Foster Care are at Increased Risk for Teenage Parenthood; Providing Additional Stability and Supports May Break the Foster Care Cycle

Community Legal Aid Society, Inc.’s Delaware Medical-Legal Partnership assists the patients of participating healthcare providers throughout Delaware to meet the un-met civil legal needs of vulnerable populations, including pregnant and postpartum women and girls. Unfortunately, teenage pregnancy rates are significantly higher amongst youth in and graduating from foster care. Data reveals that approximately half of girls in foster care become pregnant by their 19th birthday with that figure soaring to 75% by age 21 (and two-thirds have been pregnant more than once by the age of 21), compared to a rate of only one-third for non-foster care youths.² For a graphic illustration of the increased risk of pregnancy, see³:



The children of youth aging out of foster care are twice as likely to be placed in foster care, and so the cycle continues.⁴

¹ CLASI serves on the DFS Advisory and Advocacy Council, and collaborates with DFS staff on behalf of mutual clients.

² National Council of State Legislators, http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/teen-pregnancy-prevention.aspx#Foster_Care; and see: <http://thenationalcampaign.org/sites/default/files/resource-primary-download/childbearing-childwelfare.pdf>.

³ Graph source: Teen Pregnancy Among Young Women in Foster Care: A Primer, Guttmacher Institute, 2011, available at <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/gpr/14/2/gpr140208.html>.

⁴ National Council of State Legislators, http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/teen-pregnancy-prevention.aspx#Foster_Care.

The Ready by 21 ASSIST program is a needs-based stipend program, with Independent Living case management, for youth aging out of foster care. The program assists eligible youths with basic living expenses such as utilities and transportation, and would help them to promote stability and independent living. The Ready by 21 Program was developed in response to House Joint Resolution 18 of the 146th General Assembly, which found that extending foster care services and programs was needed to support young adults transitioning to adulthood, finishing school, and achieving independence.⁵ The Ready by 21 Program may provide that extra stability and guidance recent foster care graduates need in order to prevent their children from entering into the child welfare cycle, and possibly even avoid unplanned pregnancies from occurring.

II. ASSIST Stipends Support Youth with Disabilities Who are Exiting Foster Care

Youth with disabilities are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. It is estimated that between 20 and 60% of young children entering the foster care system have a developmental disability or delay.⁶ Past research regarding foster care alumni experiences revealed greater rates, compared to the general population, of mental health problems (about 50%; compare to about 22 % in the general population), including post-traumatic stress disorder (25%; compare to about 4 % in the general population) and major depression (20%; compare to about 10 % in the general population).⁷ In light of these alarming statistics, it is essential that DFS be adequately funded to both prevent and mitigate disabilities amongst youth in the foster care system. To that end, we support the Governor's Recommended Budget request to fund a third cohort of youth to receive the Ready by 21 ASSIST stipends.

The support provided through the Ready by 21 ASSIST stipends is consistent with federal policy recommendations; in fact the National Council on Disability recommends funding transition programs through the age of 24.⁸ Further, the Ready by 21 ASSIST Program is consistent with the State's goals to improve the transition from youth to adulthood for individuals with disabilities.⁹ This additional support and means toward stability will, importantly, help students with disabilities whose education continues beyond age 18 through the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Without the Ready by 21 Program, students with disabilities may find themselves unable to complete their secondary education due to problems related to maintaining their housing and transportation. Likewise, the Ready by 21 Program supports our State's efforts to promote employment of individuals with disabilities, including our Employment First legislation. Such efforts helps to ensure that transitioning youths with disabilities do not experience everyday living barriers to gaining and maintaining employment. The Ready by 21 Program enables youths with disabilities to live productive and independent lives; therefore we endorse funding a third cohort of youths to receive these stipends.

⁵ The Ready by 21 Program was developed and endorsed by the HJR 18 Committee, which included members of the legislature, judiciary, DFS, Youth Advocacy Council, and other community organizations (See Beyond 18: Ready by 21 Services for Delaware's Youth Who Have Experienced Foster Care. Response to House Joint Resolution 18, 146th General Assembly, September 2012).

⁶ Leslie, L. K., Hurlburt, M. S., Landsverk, J., Rolls, J. A., Wood, P. A., & Kelleher, K. J. (2003). Comprehensive assessments for children entering foster care: A national perspective. *Pediatrics*, 112(1), 134-142.

⁷ National Council on Disability (2008). *Youth with Disabilities in the Foster Care System: Barriers to Success and Proposed Policy Solutions* (citing Peter J. Pecora et al., *Assessing the Effects of Foster Care: Early Results from the Casey National Alumni Study*, Casey Family Programs (2003)); available at <http://www.ncd.gov/publications/2008/02262008>. Other studies have estimated rates of mental and behavioral health problems as high as 50 – 80%, Children's Rights and United Cerebral Palsy (2006). *A Case for Action for Children and Youth with Disabilities in Foster Care*; available at: <http://www.childrensrights.org/policy-projects/foster-care/children-with-disabilities-in-foster-care/2/> (citing Clausen, Landsverk, Ganger, Chadwick & Litronik, 1998; Dore, 1999; Delfabbro, 2004; dosReis, Owens, Puccia & Leaf, 2004; dosReis, Zito, Safer & Soeken, 2001; Garland, Hough, Landsverk, McCabe, Yeh, Ganger et al, 2000; Halfon, Zepeda & Inkelas, 2002; Holland & Gorey, 2004; Leslie, Hurlburt, Landsverk, Barth & Slymen, 2004; Rubin, Alessandrini, Feudtner, Mandell, Localio & Hadley, 2004; Shin, 2005).

⁸ National Council on Disability, pg. 142.

⁹ The Delaware legislature has expressed a commitment to improving this transition for individuals with disabilities, via SCR No. 34 of the 146th General Assembly, which established the State Transition Task Force for Emerging Adults with Disabilities and Special Health Care Needs. The Ready by 21 ASSIST Program is an important step to realizing the goals of SCR 34, as well as HJR 18.