

Maine Legislature Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
LD 1091: “An Act To Improve the Long-term Outcomes for Youth Transitioning from State Care by Raising the Upper Age Limit for Voluntary Support Eligibility”

Senator Claxon, Representative Meyer-Chair, and honorable members of the Health and Human Services Committee; my name is Jessica Harris, and I live in Bangor, Maine. I am a graduate of the University of Maine Social work program and am currently employed full-time as a case manager for the disability population. I am also a member of Maine’s Youth Leadership Advisory Team, which is a group of youth in foster care who are currently in care or who are alumni who are active in their community to improve foster care for the future. I have a long 9 year history of advocating all across America to bring sustainable opportunities and changes to the child welfare system to create more success than hardship on this overlooked population.

I am writing in support of LD 1091 because of the great benefits that youth in foster care would have if the V-9 was extended to the age of 23. If this extension happens, youth who are now in a spot I once stood in will not feel the overwhelming fear of not only travelling through life without a family member to rely on, but also have to make hard choices of whether to feed themselves or get a college education, or to plan to live in a car in order to keep trying to better themselves. Youth would have the necessary support and resources in order to increase the likelihood of achieving their educational and career goals on a more realistic schedule. A perfect example is how, due to moving around to over 40 different homes while I was in care, I ended up graduating high school at nineteen. As a result, I began attending college at the age of 20, pushing my graduation past the reach of support.

Two years after I turned 21 during my sophomore year of college I “aged out” of Maine’s foster care system, which meant that I was forced to face adulthood on my own without having been taught integral skills to navigate an adult-run world. Needless to say, I struggled without having someone in my life to turn to. At the time, I found it very hard to hold onto my dream of being academically successful while also keeping a roof over my head. When services were cut from me, I began to work more hours at my job while also being a full-time college student usually pulling a full course load along with a 30+ hour work week. I tried to survive on the pay I was given which was minimum wage, while also finding time to attend my classes and complete my homework. During this time I lost connections with the little amount of friends I had because I had jumped into survival mode, and when in that mode, keeping up with friends was a luxury I could not afford. A luxury that I now at the age of 30, still feel the negative effects of. While trying to balance these responsibilities, I came close to failing my classes due to attendance, choosing work over class-time, and losing my home. It has been a struggle to get to this point, and the lack of financial and relational stability made my dreams seem like an impossibility.

Throughout my life I have wanted a home—a family who I could rely on, who would accept me for who I am, and who would support me through my struggles. Fortunately, I found that family, but only after turning 26 years old. In many ways the state was and continues to be my family—a family who abruptly cut off all supports on my 21st birthday, leaving me feeling defenseless. Parents of those who aren’t in foster care are typically supportive of their children well into early adult years—census data shows that more than half of youth ages 18-24 live with their parents, something I could only dream about. Parents want their children to succeed in their transition into adulthood offering simple things like a hot meal or a place to do laundry. A young person in care gets none of these. Only with this bill passing can help come to youth who were like me as they try to reach our goals, and have food and a home while doing it. I will not benefit by the passing of this bill, I only am here today, a college

graduate with a job in a field I fought for by a miracle grant-program that came about when I was 24. Before that grant program at the age of 23 I was in talks with the school about taking a year off to work so I could try again. Although deep in my heart I knew if I left college I would never come back. Between the ages of 21 and 23 I was always behind on rent even with working so much, had only dollar tree food in my cupboard, and once on campus I had to pick a sandwich out of the trash because I had gone 3 days without food and dealt with the backlash of verbal harassment from my peers on campus who didn't understand that I was choosing rent over food, and education over mental wellbeing. There are many other youth once they turn 21 who have similar circumstances and can be spared the lack of support and the struggle I experienced. As the state claimed us as their children in our youth, I would hope that everyone would want those taxpayers' dollars to equate to a young adult ready to take on the world and make it a better place, not struggle with food pantries, college expectations, and crumbling mental wellbeing of being left without a chance of success. Investing in this bill and creating a chance for young people to have enough supportive years to not have these completely preventable situations occur, I ask all members in the room to look in deep and ask yourself, would I want my own child to experience what a foster youth experiences from age 18-23?

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions that the Committee may have.

Sincerely,
Jessica Harris
advocating.j@gmail.com
(207)951-8337