

Testimony of Dawn Rains
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Before the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Committee on Ways and
Means on Efforts to Prevent and Address Child Sex Trafficking in Washington State
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Chairman Reichert, ranking member Jim McDermott, and members of the Subcommittee on Human Resources:

Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today. My name is Dawn Rains and I currently serve as the Chief Operating Officer of Treehouse, a Seattle-based non-profit serving youth in foster care in Washington State. I have been the strategic and operational leader for Treehouse Programs and Marketing since August of 2012, and prior to that served as the Director of Development & Marketing since 2009. I have more than 20 years of experience in nonprofit management. I am also a former foster parent.

At Treehouse, our mission is giving foster kids a childhood and a future. We envision – and strive to create – a world where every child that has experienced foster care has the opportunities and supports they need to pursue their dreams and become productive members of our community.

I look forward to talking to you today about the challenges that youth in foster care currently face, and how Treehouse is investing in building a road to hope and possibility for our kids toward the bright future that they equally deserve. Specifically, I would like to focus on two key issues related to Treehouse programming and our organizational goals, as well as the proposed legislation:

- How youth-centered planning builds foster youth’s engagement and investment in their future leading to successful transitions to adulthood.
- The importance of supporting the well-being of youth in foster care by creating normalcy in their lives.

Before I discuss these key issues, though, I'll provide you with a brief history of Treehouse and the challenges that foster youth currently face in our community.

A Brief History of Treehouse

Treehouse was founded in 1988 by DSHS social workers who saw the deprivation often faced by children in foster care. They held bake sales and car washes so they could provide the little things needed to help children feel loved and capable. These small efforts have blossomed with the support of tens of thousands of generous donors and many caring and committed partners across our community.

Today, Treehouse provides access to critical extracurricular activities and community resources through our Little Wishes program and clothes, toys, and school supplies at our free store, the Wearhouse – bringing support to 6,000 youth who have experienced foster care each year. Treehouse is a major partner with Washington State’s child welfare system, providing innovative whole-child development programming that is built on what works.

Over the years, we have also piloted a wide range of education support services for youth in care, and in 2012 Treehouse embarked on the most important work yet: helping foster youth in King County graduate high school at the same rate as their peers with a plan for their future. Treehouse’s graduation equity goal addresses the alarmingly high dropout rate among high school students in foster care. Building on a quarter century of practice and the best research available, Treehouse is addressing this problem in an efficient, scalable, and replicable manner. Treehouse is uniquely committed to partnering with school systems, government agencies, caregivers, social workers, and funders to change the trajectory of kids in foster care by helping them make it to graduation day and beyond. The goal of our educational program, *Graduation Success*, is to help **foster youth in King County graduate at the same rate as their peers with a plan for their future by 2017.**

The Challenges Foster Care Youth & Alumni Face

At this very moment, there are more than 9,000 children in foster care in Washington State. Life in foster care can be extraordinarily challenging and disruptive for kids and teens, emotionally and developmentally. Separated from their family, foster youth face tremendous obstacles in school and in life. Research shows that kids in foster care suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at a higher rate than returning combat war veterans,

and more than half struggle with mental health challenges stemming from the trauma they've endured¹. Academically, foster youth face an uphill battle due to changes in home placements and school transitions, lack of basic skills, and emotional upheaval. With each transition, it's estimated that foster youth lose four to six months of academic progress.² They fall behind their peers on every educational measure, including grades, test scores, attendance and discipline referrals.² Access to important socialization opportunities – like music lessons and team sports – is limited, as is access to funding for essential needs like clothing, shoes, school supplies, haircuts, and funding for school fees.

Currently, only half of foster youth in King County graduate from high school and fewer than 2% will earn a four-year degree.³ Without a high school diploma and a plan for their future, foster youth experience disproportionately high rates of poverty, homelessness, incarceration, mental illness, unplanned pregnancy, substance abuse, and sexual exploitation when they age out or are missing from care. Nearly 25% of those leaving foster care will be homeless as adults;⁴ 33% live below the poverty line; and they will receive public assistance at five times the national rate.³ Children come into foster care through no fault of their own. We as a community have a special responsibility to kids in foster care to help them receive the same opportunities as other kids so they can graduate high school and pursue their dreams.

Building Bright Futures through *Graduation Success*

Treehouse supports empowering youth in foster care age 14 or older to participate in developing their own case plan, and selecting the individuals they want to be a part of their planning team. Current transition planning in Washington State child welfare is compliance and checklist oriented. Treehouse's *Graduation Success* program is implementing youth-centered planning or what we call student-centered planning with middle and high school aged youth in foster care. Student-centered planning is an evidence-based practice designed to elicit and inspire youth's own plans for their future within a context of support from the adults in their lives. When youth set their own course,

¹ Casey Family Programs (2011)

² Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2001)

³ Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2013).

⁴ Casey Family Programs (2005).

they build self-determination, resilience and problem-solving skills that lead to confidence and self-sufficiency as young adults. While student-centered planning is much more labor intensive than what the public system social workers typically provide, we believe the impact will be powerful in building aspiration and proactive behavior that leads to better life outcomes.

The *Graduation Success* program combines the evidence-based practices of Check & Connect and Student-Centered Planning that are proven to move youth toward high school graduation and a successful adulthood with elements that address the unique needs of youth in foster care. The *Graduation Success* program model is built specifically for foster youth. Through *Graduation Success*, Treehouse Education Specialists provide a critical stable adult presence in each student's life, partnering with social workers, caregivers, and schools, monitoring academic progress, helping youth build their own student-centered plan for the future, and serving as the "quarterback" of a network of support.

Graduation Success is based on a program model we call *ABC Plus*.

ABC Plus summarizes the six factors that lead to a successful high school graduation. The first three are tracked by schools and form the basis of an early warning indicator system:

- A is for regular class attendance
- B is for good behavior
- C is for adequate course performance

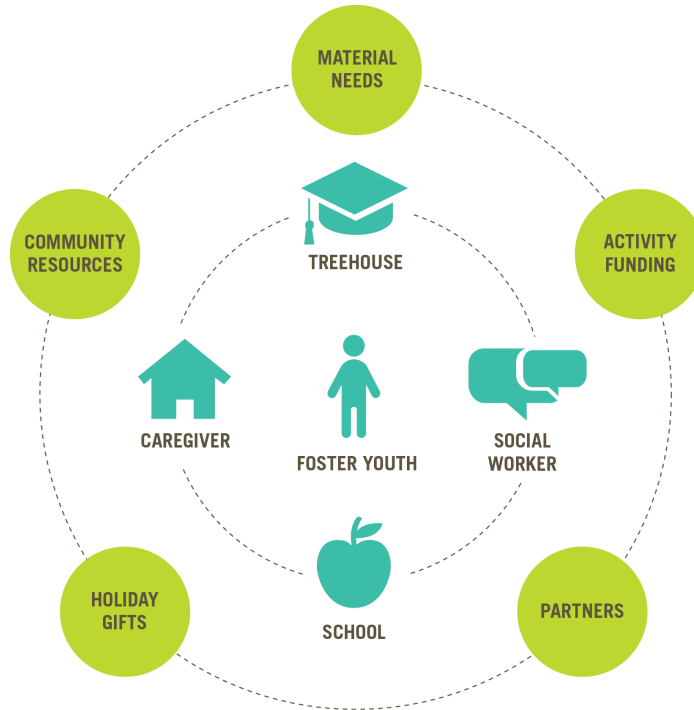
The "Plus" in our model refers to elements that research and practice have identified as critical for youth in foster care:

- Meaningful participation in an extra-curricular activity
- Non-academic factors: a sense of engagement and self-determination
- A student-centered plan for the future⁵

By keeping each student on track with positive indicators in each of these areas, *ABC Plus* keeps foster kids on the path toward high school graduation and the bright future they've planned.

⁵ University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (2012).

Graduation Success Model:



Our model delivers customized interventions and support to help every student succeed in every one of these six areas of focus. Each student we serve is at the center of our services. Every youth works with a Treehouse Education Specialist who makes sure that she receives appropriate, rapidly-delivered services tailored to her individual developmental needs.

Treehouse Education Specialists begin by partnering with social workers and caregivers to create a portrait of each youth's needs. Then, the Education Specialist gets to know each student through ongoing, supportive weekly meetings. Together they create a student-centered plan to define aspirational goals and the educational milestones that the youth will need to achieve to stay on track toward those goals. Student-centered planning provides youth with the opportunity for their voices to be heard and for them to create personally meaningful goals. Research shows that youth whose educational plans align with their interests are more motivated to accomplish their goals than those expected to

follow plans others make for them⁶. In addition, student-centered planning builds self-determination skills which are linked to a foster youth's ability to overcome barriers throughout their transition to adulthood⁷.

The Education Specialist works with each student and a Treehouse In-School "Check and Connect" Mentor to monitor *ABC Plus* progress and choose appropriate interventions and services from Treehouse or our partners. "Check and Connect," is an evidence-based comprehensive student engagement intervention that improves kids staying in school and has the potential to improve school progress according to the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse⁸. Check and Connect interventions have also demonstrated to improve graduation rates for youth⁹. Attendance, behavior, and course performance are systematically monitored in the "check" component by the in-school mentor. The "connect" component is comprised of the wide range of individualized short- and long-term interventions that are delivered by Education Specialists, who maintain a consistent relationship with the youth to get and keep kids on track toward their goals. A well-timed school meeting involving all of the providers and family members in a youth's life can change the trajectory from failure to success. In situations where a more emergent need arises – such as a behavior issue that leads to suspension, or a need for specialized supports at school – Treehouse uses its tested *Education Advocacy* intervention to prevent or reduce time out of class and keep kids in school.

We leverage partners and volunteers through targeted referrals that align with each student's individualized plan. When a student needs specialized services, such as tutoring, counseling, and college preparation, we connect the student to the appropriate community resource or a Treehouse volunteer and monitor progress. Formal partnerships with the State and school districts leverage additional support and information-sharing.

⁶ Lindstrom, L., Paskey, J., Dickinson, J., Doren, B., Zane, C., & Johnson, P. *The Journal for Vocational Special Needs Education*, (2007)

⁷ Powers, L. E., Geenen, S., Powers, J., Pommier-satya, S., Turner, A., Dalton, L. D., Drummond, D., et al. *Children and Youth Services Review*, (2012)

⁸ <http://ies.ed.gov>

⁹ Appleton, J., Christenson, S. L., & Furlong, M. J., *Psychology in the Schools*, (2008)

Education Specialists work with a Treehouse team to keep kids engaged in our unique services such as Little Wishes, which funds and coordinates extra-curricular engagement and additional learning opportunities, and the Wearhouse, which provides free clothing and school supplies. We also give every youth in foster care a holiday gift to reinforce the feeling of being valued and cared for.

An Education Specialist is the year-round “quarterback” of this network, providing coaching to develop a positive mindset and drive progress towards meeting the goals in the student-centered plan. Education Specialists guide a collective effort that surrounds each student with critical resources focused on helping the student achieve success.

Education Specialists are often times the one significant, consistent adult presence in a foster youth’s life. They are uniquely situated in a critical role if a youth should be at risk of or actually go on the run. In the spring of 2014 Education Specialists are being trained on how to identify the risk factors associated with sexual exploitation and how to support and redirect these youth including engaging them with extracurricular activities. If a youth should go on the run, they often times keep in touch with our staff and/or visit our Wearhouse to stock up on resources, and we are currently working together with DSHS Children Administration’s Missing from Care Committee to strategize how to locate and re-engage these youth in support services.

Supporting Normalcy for Youth in Foster Care

Treehouse supports the empowerment of licensed foster parents and relative caregivers via a reasonable and prudent parent standard, which would allow them to make more day-to-day decisions about youth’s ability to participate in normal childhood and youth experiences like family vacations, friend sleepovers, school field trips, summer camp and more. Currently, bureaucratic barriers impede court and social worker efforts and frustrate caregivers without adding value for youth.

Normal childhood experiences are foundational experiences that help youth develop interests, skills and dreams for the future. The relationships and connections that are built doing these activities, as well as the exposure to the activities themselves contribute to a

youth's sense of belonging in their school or community, their mental health and well-being.¹⁰ As a part of the Treehouse student-centered planning process, Education Specialists ask foster youth to identify extra-curricular activities that would be of interest to them. These short-term goals are fulfilled by the Treehouse Wearhouse and Little Wishes programs which provide appropriate attire, equipment and help with funding for extra-curricular opportunities. This is a critical piece of our model because we know that kids who are positively engaged in school and community have better academic and life outcomes. We also know these activities build a critical protective factor, that make youth less vulnerable to exploitation and sex trafficking. The 1998 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that perceived connectedness is a protective factor against eight health-compromising behaviors¹¹. In contrast, a lack of a sense of belonging has been linked to school violence, risky sexual behavior and drug use¹².

Measuring *Graduation Success Performance*

Treehouse tracks key performance indicators on overall capacity, student performance toward graduation, and the impact of each team on the students they serve.

Performance tracking in Graduation Success captures:

- Graduation rates
- Students “on track to graduate” – they have the grades and course credits to lead them to graduation
- The six ABC Plus factors

Our Education Specialists receive extensive on-going training and coaching. Fidelity of implementation is assured through routine observations of fieldwork, case reviews, annual performance reviews, and comprehensive data monitoring. Program efficacy is monitored through prudent evaluation and impact measurement.

¹⁰ Townsend, K. C., & Mcwhirter, B. T., *Journal of Counseling & Development*, (2005)

¹¹ Resnick, M. D., Bearman, P. S., Blum, R. W., Bauman, K. E., Harris, K. M., Jones, J., et al. In R. E. Muuss & H. D. Porton (Eds.), *Adolescent behavior and society: A book of readings*, (1998)

¹² Whitlock, J. L., *Applied Developmental Science*, (2006)

We see every youth in foster care as at risk of poor or failing outcomes and believe each needs an Educational Specialist. We are currently serving over 500 middle and high school youth in King County, and are on course to fully saturate the population of foster youth in our community. We are fully committed to transparently demonstrating results, learning from our experience and modifying the strategy to achieve educational outcomes for foster youth on parity or better than their peer group. We look forward to reporting the impact of this strategy with youth in foster care in the future.

Conclusion

Chairman Reichert and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. At Treehouse we are whole-heartedly invested in the pursuit of equity for every youth in foster care and believe that we can help change their future trajectory avoiding tragic outcomes like sex trafficking. We thank you for considering this legislation to help support this effort. I look forward to answering questions you might have about our work, and Treehouse looks forward to partnering with members of the Subcommittee and others to ensure a bright future for youth in foster care.

Respectfully submitted,



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