

**Dawna Zender Hovenier**  
**Written Testimony**  
**House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources**  
***Are We Overmedicating Children in Foster Care?***  
**May 29, 2014**

Thank you Chairman Reichert, Ranking Member Doggett, and Committee members for giving me the opportunity to speak. My name is Dawna Zender Hovenier, I am 21 years old and I spent seven years in foster care in Washington State. On my 18th birthday, in December of 2010, I aged out of foster care and was released after spending seven months in a lock up adolescent psychiatric hospital.

My hope is that the government will quit spending millions of dollars forcing foster kids like me to take drugs they do not need and help give them things they do need such as a volunteer CASA who believes in them, skilled mental health professionals who can talk to them and most of all a loving home with compassionate parents that believe in them.

I was ordered into the psychiatric hospital after my social worker told the court I had Borderline Personality Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder and suicidal ideation. I was forced to take strong doses of psychiatric medications and told I could probably never live on my own. Only my CASA and the man who became my father agreed with me that I didn't need the drugs. The seven months I was locked up and forced to take drugs against my will felt like being in jail.

After reviewing my records, I discovered that the foster care system paid almost \$15,000 a month, about \$120,000 total, to lock me up and take psychiatric drugs that I did not need.

Last year I earned my Certified Nurses Aide certificate after successfully completing two years of classes at Bellingham Technical College. My GPA was a 3.92. I am currently enrolled at Whatcom Community College in Bellingham, Washington. Thanks to federal and state funding for former foster youth, I was able to complete all my prerequisites for a nursing degree, and I am hoping to get accepted into an R.N. program to pursue my dream of becoming a nurse.

I have lived independently for more than two years. I have been off all psychiatric medication for more than three years. I have never felt better or happier.

What happened? How did I transition from being diagnosed a mentally disabled foster youth to a model student and productive member of society?

I don't have time to tell my entire story. Despite everything I experienced growing up, I know I was lucky. When I was 16, a man who recently became my father and is here with me today, adopted my then 10-year-old brother out of foster care. My younger brother was forced to take psychiatric drugs in foster care too, but he has been off them since his adoption more than five years ago. My dad hired an attorney to fight the state's plan to transfer me to an adult psychiatric facility. He picked me up on my 18th birthday and took me to live with his friends. They are my family now too, so today it feels like I have two dads and a mom.

The next six months were among the most difficult in my life. Because of my diagnosis in foster care, we couldn't find a psychiatrist willing to take me off the drugs, so we had to do it ourselves. This meant battling the intense withdrawal symptoms: one of the medications I was on can cause seizures resulting in death if discontinued hastily. My dad wrote a book about adopting my brother from foster care, and some of the professionals who read it advised him how to get me off all the medications.

Six months after aging out of foster care, I managed to graduate from Mount Baker High School with my class. A few months later, I moved into my own apartment. My new family helped me find an excellent therapist who supported my decision not to take drugs. Today I am able to talk about my feelings, but in the psychiatric hospital I was so drugged up I never knew how I felt. My twin sister said the drugs made me seem like a zombie.

I know some of the kids I was locked up with needed medication. They heard voices that weren't there and sometimes got violent, but I believe many of the kids were like me, and didn't need to be drugged. What they needed was a family that loved them and parents to guide them. When I think about the government spending more than \$120,000 locking me up and forcing me to take drugs I did not need, it makes me angry. I wish the money could have been spent helping foster kids instead of harming me.

Despite all of this, I've been so lucky. A few months ago, on the same day as my brother's adoption five years ago, my dad adopted my twin sister and me. What really helped me get off the medication was being surrounded by people who loved me and wanted to help me. I believe what most foster kids need is love, not drugs.

Although I can never get back the seven months that I was locked up and forced to take drugs against my will, I hope that telling my story here today and continue to work with the Mockingbird Society will help other youth like me and encourage change.

In closing, I want to thank the Mockingbird Society for making it possible for me to come from Seattle to be here. They are an awesome advocacy organization that helps young people like me share our experiences to improve the foster care system and gives us a chance to be heard.

I'll always be grateful to my CASA for being the one person who really knew me and who told the court that he agreed with me that I didn't need medication and I'll be forever grateful to my dad for adopting me, and for all my new family, my therapist, and twin sister for giving me the support I needed to stop taking psychiatric medication I did not need and become who I am today.

Thank you Chairman Reichert for all the work you do for foster kids and for inviting me here to speak.