



January 22, 2024

Good Afternoon Chair Concannon, Ranking Member Ousely and Members of the House Committee on Child Welfare and Foster Care. My name is Laura Walters, and I am Director of Client Support Services with Cornerstones of Care. In my director capacity, I oversee operations of Permanency Aftercare support, Independent Living, Runaway Response Team, Parent-Youth Facilitation programming, and SOUL. I am submitting this testimony today to speak in support of House Bill 2536, the SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option.

Despite best efforts to work closely with youth to build Independent Living skills and prepare them for life after foster care, youth frequently find themselves in vulnerable positions, facing homelessness, instability, and exploitation. Youth struggle to maintain ties to family members that have been deemed unfit to care for them, challenging their identity and creating internal conflict. Older youth often have strong feelings regarding their connections with their parents, despite adverse childhood experiences. This can lead to internal conflict and rebellion, as they strive to make sense of their circumstances.

I support the SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option because it provides an avenue for youth to remain connected to their biological/first families without breaking legal ties, and/or remain connected to those they have identified as trusted adults or chosen family. When youth feel connected with an adult, they are more likely to turn to them for guidance and accept support. While Cornerstones of Care emphasizes connections for youth, current legal options require a termination of parental rights, which can demoralize youth.

The SOUL Family Legal Permanency allows a legal option where youth can acknowledge the challenges within their first families and express preferences and opinions regarding who might best advocate for them as they move towards further independence. As a trauma-informed agency, Cornerstones of Care strives to ensure that youth have a say in the decisions that are being made around and about them. The SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option grants opportunities to further extend this trauma-informed approach to discussions surrounding permanency options for older youth.

I support an avenue that considers the preferences of youth, emphasizes the development of lifelong connections and support, and provides access to resources that are equitable to other permanency options. This could be an essential tool in reducing the number of youth who emancipate or “age out” of the foster care system, allowing them to be released from custody under the guidance of one or several individuals who commit to support them. The SOUL Family Permanency option provides a path forward for youth to exit the foster care system while maintaining strong supportive processes to ensure their physical, mental health and emotional

needs are fully met. When combined with the efforts of the Foster care and Aftercare teams, youth would experience wrap around care and support from multiple avenues.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Laura Walters
Director of Client Support Services
Cornerstone of Care
816-820-5263