

**Senate Judiciary Committee**  
**Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law**  
**Hearing on The Human Rights of Foster Children**  
**October 25, 2023**

**Written Testimony of Mon'a Houston**

Chairman Ossoff, Ranking Member Blackburn and members of the Subcommittee.

My name is Mon'a Houston. I am 19 years old, and I am here today to share my experience as a former foster youth in the DFCS system in Georgia.

I was in care from 2017 to 2022. During that time, I had 18 placements--only two were foster homes. The rest were group homes, institutions, or hotels. I had three case managers, and only one regularly visited me or answered my phone calls. I would often go more than six months without seeing my case manager. I felt alone.

One of the worst parts about being in care was that I was overmedicated. DFCS kept telling my doctors to up my dosage because I was not behaving. I was overmedicated to the point of always feeling overtired and sluggish. It hurt to walk. But I had a lot of trauma and no one to talk about it with. The only time I regularly saw a therapist was when I was in Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health for ten months. Devereux was a maximum security residential treatment program. I was in the behavioral program, similar to a group home but with more security. It was a lockdown facility. It was behind two barbed wire fences, and you never left the campus- not for school, outings, or food. I only left for doctor appointments. During this time, I was often physically restrained. They slammed me into the walls and put my arms in locks. They would wrap their legs around me so I couldn't move. At three different times, I was put into isolation for five days. The isolation room was similar to a jail cell, and I was treated as an inmate. You had to request access to the bathroom. I wasn't allowed to shower. Even when on my menstrual cycle, I couldn't wash or change for three days. This was the darkest time in a placement.

Education was challenging while in care. Because I was moving placements so much, the only education I would get would be online. I asked my case manager and my placements for a tutor because I struggled with understanding the school work. But no one would listen. Eventually, I just gave up on school. I still have not completed my GED.

My most traumatic experience was when I was arrested at a group home when I was 17. The group home showed police a video that did not include me being attacked first. Staff didn't de-escalate the situation, and on September 7, I was taken to a jail in Americus, Georgia.

When I was in jail, I was scared and alone and didn't know anything about what was going to happen. My case manager never called me. This was my first time ever getting in trouble. No one from DFCS brought me any of the medications that I was on – which resulted in significant depression and not eating. After a month in jail, the sheriff was trying to help me get out for my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, which is October 26<sup>th</sup>. They said I could be released on a \$200 bail. DFCS refused to pay my bail, and I could only be released to DFCS custody. I was at DFCS' mercy, and they left me there for another month. The sheriff finally offered an OR bond, and on November 8<sup>th</sup>, I was released to DFCS custody. They picked me up and put me in a hotel for two weeks.

The hotel was my last placement. I thought my case manager was finally coming to visit me, but she just sent someone else instead. This person told me to sign a bunch of papers. I was so angry that my case manager didn't show up that I did what she told me to do, and I signed those papers. I was furious; if I knew what those papers said, I never would have signed them.

The person said to me “You just signed yourself out of care. You need to be checked out of the hotel by 11am and we are not responsible for helping you get back to Savannah.” My attorney and CASA were not present and were unaware of these papers being presented to me. They left me at the hotel in Columbus, Georgia. If it wasn't for one kind behavioral aide, I never would have gotten home to Savannah.

I am doing this so other youth know they can come out the other side. I was 17 when I was finally assigned a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). Ms. Page was the first adult who listened to me. She would regularly fight with DFCS to get me what I needed. I had one good case manager who showed she cared about me and listened to me. And now, I'm connected with Brightside Advocacy, which supports me and provides me with hope.