

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION
JOINTLY WITH THE COMMITTEE
ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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April 28, 2026
Start: 10:19 a.m.
Recess: 1:30 p.m.

HELD AT: 250 Broadway - 8th Floor - Hearing
Room 2

B E F O R E: Rita Joseph,
Chairperson for the Committee on
Higher Education

Althea Stevens,
Chairperson for the Committee on
Children and Youth

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Joann Ariola
Gale A. Brewer
Eric Dinowitz
Harvey D. Epstein
Simcha Felder
Farah N. Louis
Virginia Maloney
Lincoln Restler

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Shirley de Pena
Director of Foster Youth College

Sonia Gonzalez
College Success Initiatives

McKeema Wallace
FYCSI

Ina Mendez

Adams Reyes
Dreams Youth Build

Najmah Nicole Abraham
Youth Build

Ethan Colon
Youth Build

Jaylen Casaro
Youth Build

Ethan Colon
YAYB

Ali Rouse

Mamoudou Diomande
University Student Senate

Michael Zink
At the Table

Akkeem Polack
CUNY USS

Daniel Reden
CUNY USS

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Fatima-Zahara Kamil
CUNY USS

Josiah Rumesar
CUNY USS

Megan Grunlund

Nubia Fields

Lorraine Gonzalez Camastra
Forestdale Inc.

Awais Novaz
Forestdale Inc.

Unique Perez
Forestdale Inc.

Klo Vinson
JCCA

Rashad Pierce
JCCA

Wendy Finkel
JCCA

Alyssa Rouse
Fostering Youth Success Alliance, FYSA

Bonnie Langer
New York Foundling

Jaclyn Goodman
Legal Aid Society

Jasiyah Gilbert
Legal Aid Society

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Cheyenne Deopersaud
At the Table

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2 COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH 5

3 SERGEANT AT ARMS: This is a microphone check for
4 the Committee on Higher Education joint with Children
5 and Youth. Today's date is April 28th, 2026, being
6 recorded by Tavell King, Hearing Room 2.

7 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning, welcome to the
8 Committee on Higher Education joint with Committee on
9 Children and Youth. At this time, we ask that you
10 please silence all electronics. If you wish to fill
11 out an appearance card, please see one of the
12 Sergeants-at-Arms in the back. Chair, you may begin.

13 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: [GAVEL] Good morning. I'm
14 Council Member Rita Joseph, Chair of the Committee on
15 Higher Education. Welcome to our joint hearing with
16 Committee on Children and Youth, Chaired by Council
17 Member Althea Stephens.

18 Today's oversight hearing is strengthening CUNY's
19 pathway for current and former foster youth. Let me
20 start by saying, I was a foster mom who adopted boys,
21 two boys. So this hearing is especially important to
me. I know firsthand about the obstacles that young
people with a background in foster care and their
families can face. I also know about the kind of
supports that can be provided for programs like those
we are going to discuss in this hearing.

CUNY and the Administration of Children's Services both work separately and together in a variety of ways to ensure that students with a background in foster care get the support they need to succeed in college. For example, CUNY's Foster Youth College Success Initiative provides financial aid to CUNY students to cover tuition and fees, on-campus housing, transportation, books, and other necessary expenses, as well as arranges for individualized personal and career counseling.

ACS College Choice Program and ACS Cooperative Program with the Sense- Center for Fair Futures also provide a variety of support to CUNY students. Including financial assistance, academic advisement, career and personal counseling, and life skills coaching. Our Committees look forward to learning- to- forward to hearing how CUNY and ACS has been working to help students with a background in foster care get the assistance they need to enroll in CUNY and to be successful enough to graduate.

Finally, we are interested in how the City Council can support those efforts. I wanna acknowledge my colleagues that are here, Council Member Louis, Council Member Epstein. I also wanna

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2 to thank my Chief of Staff, Juvanie Piquant, Chief of
3 Staff Julia Goldsmith-Pinkham, the Committee's Senior
4 Legislative Counsel, Regina Paul, the Committee's
5 Senior Legislative Policy Analyst, and Allie Stofer,
6 the Committee's Financial Analyst.

7
8 At this time, I would like to invite Chair
9 Stevens to give her opening statement.

10
11 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Good morning. I'm Council
12 Member— I'm Council Member Althea Stevens, Chair of
13 New York City's Council Committee on Children and
14 Youth. I would like to begin by thanking Chair
15 Joseph for convening this important hearing and
16 studying the pathways to CUNY, um, for current and
17 former foster care youth. I know this issue that is
18 deeply personal to her, and I'm grateful that our
19 commitment, um, our Committees are combining on this
20 topic today.

21
22 ACS and CUNY both play critical roles in New York
23 City efforts to ensure that current and former foster
24 youth are able to access higher education
25 opportunities. The Fair Futures and College Choice
26 programs offer through ACS and their contractors are
27 vital support that provide a range of services to
28 help students who are navigating the higher education

1 system without support of traditional family
2 structure. The College Choice program is designed to
3 provide financial assistance and academic supports to
4 foster care youth seeking 2 or 4-year degree
5 programs, including money for tuition, housing, and
6 additional living expenses.

7 ACS also partners with Fair Futures to provide a
8 wide range of services, including one-on-one coaching
9 for, um, uh, emotional support, academic success, and
10 career readiness, and housing navigating- navigation
11 and life skill developments, all of which are
12 available through, um, city's foster care agencies.
13 At a time when tuition, housing, and cost of living
14 are seen as a growing barrier to obtaining higher
15 education nationwide, that those programs address
16 core obstacles and provide holistic resources to
17 improve student success.

18 The financial, material, and personalized
19 resources offered through those programs are
20 incredibly valuable for current and former, um,
21 foster youth who are pursuing higher education. We
education, and we look forward to discussing these
programs to identify opportunities to strengthen,
expand, and better coordinate those services. I

1
2 would like to thank Committee Staff. Before I could
3 thank staff, I wanna also say, um, the last 2 years
4 I've had the honor of working with Children's Aid for
5 Foster Care Shadow Day, and college access has been
6 one of the growing things that our young people have
7 been requesting and saying that there has been huge
8 inconsistencies on what they're seeing on the ground
9 and how these programs are being rolled out.

10 So I hope today we have a real enlightened
11 discussion about how can we really take down those
12 barriers so young people can access the things that
13 they need and also work with the providers to be more
14 consistent and persistent on the information. We've
15 already passed legislation calling for, you know, um,
16 this work to be posted. One of the young people who
17 has been a huge advocate— hi Taylor, um, in the back—
18 um, has been a huge advocate on some of the work and,
19 and wanna make sure that we are making sure that
20 young people have access.

21 And now I'll thank my Committee Staff, Staff
Analysts, Elizabeth Arzt, um, Senior Committee
counsel, Rie — how do you say her last name?
Ogasawara. She's great. She's not here though. For
their hard work in preparing for this hearing. Um,

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2 and my entire team back at the district office, for
3 their work in serving the community while I'm here at
4 City Hall.

5 With that, I will turn it back to Council Member
6 Joseph.

7 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Thank you, Chair Stevens. I
8 would like to remind everyone who wishes to testify
9 in person today that you must fill out a witness slip
10 which is located on the desk of the Sergeant-at-Arms
11 near the entrance of this room.

12 Please fill out the slip even if you have already
13 registered in advance that you will be testifying in
14 person. To allow as many people as possible to
15 testify, testimonies will be limited to 2 minutes per
16 person, whether you're on testifying in person or on
17 Zoom.

18 I'm also going to ask my colleagues to limit
19 their questions and comments to 5 minutes. Please
20 note that witnesses who are here in person will
21 testify before those who are signed on into the Zoom.
Um, I'd like to recognize Council Member Ariola,
who's on Zoom.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Good morning. I'll, uh,
swear you in now for your testimony. Uh, please

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1 raise your right hand. Do you swear to tell the
2 truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in
3 your testimony before this Committee, and to answer
4 truthfully, uh, to Council Member questions?

5 PANEL: Yes.

6 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you.

7 Good morning, Chairs Joseph and Stevens and
8 members of the Higher Education and Children and
9 Youth Community- Communities. Yes, sorry, I'm sorry
10 about that. No, why not? Yep, I got you. I'm gonna
start right over.

11 MCKEEMA WALLACE: Good morning, Chairs Joseph and
12 Stevens and members of the Higher Education and
13 Children and Youth Committees. My name is McKeema
14 Wallace, and I am a proud member of the Hunter
15 College Class of 2026. If someone had asked me years
16 ago where I believed I would- excuse me, where I
17 believed I would be today, I would have never
imagined standing here as a college graduate. That
is why I wanna share my story.

18 When I first became a ward of the state, I had no
19 clear vision of what my future would look like. Much
20 of my childhood was spent searching for love and
21 acceptance and stability, moving through multiple

1 foster homes, me constantly adjusting to other
2 people's lives, routines, and families.

3 I really felt a true sense of belonging. I often
4 felt temporarily as though everything around me could
5 disappear at any moment. After experiencing so much
6 instability, that feeling became my reality. There
7 were times when I felt unvalued, unwanted, and
8 without the security that every child deserves. The
9 stability I longed for did not arrive during some of
10 the hardest moments of my life. That pain led me
11 down to difficult paths and unhealthy coping
12 mechanisms.

13 My mind was not in a place where school felt
14 possible or important. During this period, I
15 expressed moments where I felt I had to use my body
16 to survive, and I struggled with substance use as I
17 tried to cope with everything I had been through.
18 That time was painful and complex, but God had other
19 plans for me.

20 I began working towards my GED. It was not easy.
21 It took time, determination, and perseverance,
especially with limited resources and support.
Nevertheless, I accomplished my goal in earning my

GED, becoming— became the, the first step towards
changing my, my life.

Through my foster care agency, Graham Windham, I
was introduced to Alex Perez, who connected me to the
DORM Project. That program became life-changing for
me. For the first time, I found not only academic
support, but also confidence in myself. I became a
part of a community of people who understood
struggle, yet were striving for something greater.
When I first started college at Queensborough
Community College in the fall of 2016, I had a
difficult time. I was dealing with overwhelming
circumstances that made it hard for me to stay
focused and present in the classes. And when I was
faced with impossible reality, continuing my
education required a level of stability I didn't
have— I didn't yet have.

But leaving school meant returning to a foster
home, a transition that left me feeling unsettled and
unsure I could continue. I did what I thought was
right for me at the time and made the diff— and made
the difficult decision to stop attending school one
year later in the fall of 2017. With the help of
foster care— with the help of my foster care worker,

1
2 I entered supportive housing and received a housing
3 voucher, which provided stability but also made the
4 decision— but also made the decision to pause my
5 education— education for final.

6 Taking that break from school left me feeling as
7 though I had failed. I did not think I could go
8 back, especially after starting and stopping so many
9 times. And I had believed I reached the limit of
10 support available to me. I remember wishing I had
11 finished my classes instead of withdrawing. I had
12 programs like College Discovery and access to the
13 kinds of support every college student needs, and I
14 worried that once I left, I would not have that
15 support again. But when I came back in the spring of
16 2022, this time at Bronx Community College, FYCSI was
17 there waiting for me with open arms.

18 Um, even when I was no longer eligible for
19 certain programs, FYCSI made sure I did not lack any
20 support I needed. And even then, I was afraid,
21 afraid to fail, afraid that I was not enough.
22 However, Shirley de Pena showed up for me in every
23 possible way, just as she, just as she has done for
24 many others. She made sure we had what we needed
25 from basic necessities to emotional and academic

1 support. She believed in us when we could not
2 believe in ourselves.

3 Programs like FYCSI gave me strength and
4 confidence throughout my educational journey while
5 balancing work and life's many hardships. School
6 became my safe place. One of my greatest fears was
7 my age and that feeling that I was running out of
8 time. But FYCSI taught me that no matter what life
places in front of you, keep going.

9 I have withdrawn and returned to school more
10 times than I can count. I often joke that I may be
11 one of Shirley's super, super seniors. I know, but I
12 know, but what that truly represents is resilience.
13 Alongside FYCSI, At the Table also supported me,
14 where Mike, Asia, and my tutor Heather each played an
15 important role in my growth. I would also like to
16 reg- recognize Youngin Shin, a caseworker at City
Living, whose consistent support has made a
meaningful impact on my life.

17 Together, these programs and individuals created
18 a powerful community around me, one rooted in
19 commitment, care, and belief. Through all of this, I
20 discovered my passion for social work. I wanna give
21 back in the same way others gave to me. I wanna be

1 like Shirley. I wanna be a part of a life-changing
2 program that supports others and believes in them and
3 helps them see your own potential. I'm so proud to
4 say that I earned my associate's degree from Bronx
5 Community College where I made the Dean's List twice.

6 Today I stand as a graduate in my family, a
7 college graduate in my family. There were many
8 moments when life felt dark and uncertain, even
9 recently during a difficult move I did, I did not
10 know how I was gonna manage financially. Before I
11 had searched anywhere else for help, my FYCSI stipend
12 arrived. Right when I needed it the most.

13 Time and time again, this program has shown up
14 for me. Because of that support, I have not had to
15 worry about educational support or carrying every
16 burden alone. This is why I want to sincerely thank
17 the state and CUNY for investing in programs- that-
18 investing in these programs like FYCSI. These are
19 not just simply programs, these are lifelines, and
20 thank you. They provide the change- they prove, they
21 prove that change is possible, success is achievable,
and no one has to do it alone. Everyone deserves
this kind of support, belief, and opportunity. FYCSI
gave me that and it changed my life forever.

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2 And Shirley, thank you for everything you have
3 done for me. I have always looked at you as a mother
4 figure and deeply admired you as the woman you are.
5 You taught me that the beginning of my story does not
6 determine how it ends. When I doubted myself, you
7 reminded me that I am greater than my circumstances.
8 Your patience, your kindness, honesty, and
9 accountability pushed me to keep going.

10 You are— you saw potential in me long before I
11 could see it in myself. I am truly grateful that God
12 placed you in my life because you always saw my
13 future b-beyond my present challenges. Thank you,
14 CUNY. Thank you, Shirley. I will carry your
15 guidance with me, and I will always strive to make
16 you guys proud. Thank you.

17 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Thank you for sharing. We
18 really appreciate you sharing your story, and thank
19 you for being here today. We really appreciate you.
20 And I'm also a Hunter grad, so look at us. But thank
21 you for sharing.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Thank you for sharing your
story, and that's why we're doing this hearing, so
other young people can get the same support that you

1
2 have. I wasn't here for the tears, but I'm here. So
3 thank you.

4 MCKEEMA WALLACE: Thank you. You need a moment,
5 Shirley?

6 SHIRLEY DE PENA: I'm good, I'm good. Uh, good
7 morning, Chairs Joseph and Stevens, and members of
8 the Higher Education and Children and Youth
9 Committees. My name is Shirley de Peña, and I serve
10 as the Director of the Foster Youth College Success
11 Initiative or FYCSI, within the Central Office of
12 Student Affairs at CUNY. I am pleased to be joined
13 today by my colleagues at ACS and also by a current
14 FYCSI student, McKeema Wallace, who you just heard
15 from.

16 Thank you for convening this hearing and for your
17 continued commitment to social justice, equity, and
18 opportunity for students who have experienced foster
19 care or identify as orphans. I appreciate the
20 opportunity to speak with you today about FYCSI and
21 the ways in which CUNY is working very intentionally
to support these students as they pursue to their
educational goals.

FYCSI is a New York State-funded program designed
to support current and former foster youth and

1 eligible orphans as they pursue their first associate
2 or bachelor's degree. The program includes myself as
3 director, as well as part-time social work
4 supervisors and master's level social work interns
5 who support FYCSI students across the system.

6 FYCSI is funded entirely through New York State
7 Appropriations, and CUNY is grateful for the state's
8 continued commitment to supporting students with
9 foster care histories.

10 For FY26, CUNY's allocation was approximately
11 \$3.6 million. Eligibility for FYCSI is based on
12 foster care or orphan status. Students who are
13 undocumented or who have refugee status may receive
14 FYCSI funding if they meet program eligibility
15 requirements. FYCSI is offered across all
16 undergraduate CUNY campuses. Students are free to
17 enroll at the campus that best meets their academic
18 and personal needs and are not restricted in order to
19 receive support.

20 CUNY uses multiple coordinated systems to
21 identify students with foster care backgrounds and
ensure they remain connected to support. Students
may self-identify during admissions or financial aid
processes, be referred by campus offices, or be

1 connected through external partners. A critical part
2 of this work is our strong partnership with the New
3 York State Office of Children and Family Services or
4 OCFS, which verifies foster care eligibility for all
5 current and former foster youth.

6 For students who qualify as orphans, FYCSI works
7 directly with these students to re- review required
8 documentation, including death certificates. We also
9 work with students who were in foster care outside of
10 New York State. While they are fully eligible for
11 FYCSI, they are required to provide verification from
12 the appropriate agency in their state of care.

13 Once eligibility is confirmed, FYCSI students are
14 tracked centrally through CUNY systems and in
15 partnership with our data team, allowing us to
16 monitor enrollment, persistence, and service
17 utilization over time.

18 CUNY evaluates FYCSI using multiple indicators,
19 including year-to-year retention, continued
20 enrollment, degree progress, and graduation outcomes.
21 Over the past 10 years, the Foster Youth College
Success Initiative has grown from a small pilot
serving only a handful of students into a system-wide
high-impact program that has supported 1,360 unique

1
2 current, former— current foster and formerly foster
3 youth across CUNY while distributing more than \$11.2
4 million in direct financial support to help students
5 remain enrolled and persist toward their degrees.

6 Since FYCSI became the primary foster youth
7 program at CUNY in FY20, the program went from
8 funding 141 students in 2020 to 586 in 2025, an
9 increase in reach by 415%, and allowing us to scale
10 individualized trauma-informed support across the
11 system.

12 This investment is producing real results. To
13 date, 417 FYCSI students have earned at least one
14 college degree, and a total of 521 degrees have been
15 awarded, including 307 associate degrees and 214
16 bachelor's degrees, reflecting that some students
17 have gone on to earn more than one credential.

18 Many additional students are currently enrolled
19 and progressing toward completion. Housing stability
20 is one of the most critical supports FYCSI provides.
21 Currently, approximately 80 FYCSI students are living
in 5 CUNY residence halls. 4 of these residence
halls operate year-round, ensuring that students do
not have to find alternate— alternative housing
during summer breaks. One residence hall is not

1
2 year-round, and students who live there do so by
3 choice, typically because they have a safe and
4 reliable option during breaks.

5 For students who live in CUNY residence halls,
6 FYCSI covers 100% of housing costs. In addition to
7 housing, FYCSI covers tuition and mandatory fees,
8 addresses prior and current Bursar balances, and
9 provides educational and transportation stipends to
10 help offset the cost of books, supplies, and
11 commuting. These supports are intended to remove the
12 most common barriers to persistence and prevent
13 crisis-driven interruptions to enrollment.

14 A defining feature of FYCSI is its case
15 management model. We recognized early on that
16 students who participate in programs such as College
17 Discovery and SEEK, ASAP, and ACE benefit
18 tremendously from having a dedicated advisor who
19 works closely with a cohort of students.

20 While many FYCSI students participate in those
21 programs, not all are eligible or choose to do so,
though we maintain strong relationships with those
initiatives and regularly encourage students to
explore them. To ensure that no FYCSI student is
navigating college alone, master's-level social work

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2 interns supervised by licensed social workers are
3 automatically assigned to FYCSI students who are not
4 already receiving structured advising through those
5 aforementioned programs.

6 At the same time, students who are enrolled in
7 those programs may also choose to work with a social
8 work intern, and we gladly assign one when requested.
9 This model allows students to receive individualized,
10 high-touch support around academic challenges,
11 personal stressors, housing instability, and system
12 navigation. With nearly 600 FYCSI students across 19
13 campuses, this structured internship model is
14 essential. It is what allows FYCSI to provide the
15 level of intensive relational support that b- has
16 become a hallmark of the program and that would not
17 otherwise be possible with one full-time staff member
18 alone.

19 Students with foster care histories often arrive
20 at college having learned to be resilient, even when
21 they have not always had the support to fully
recognize their own worth and potential. We are
deeply committed to helping young people see
themselves in ways they may not always be able to see
on their own, especially those whose circumstances

1
2 and past experiences can shape how they view their
3 worth, their value, and what they believe they are
4 capable of achieving. What I am most proud of in
5 FYCSI is our ability to tailor our program so that we
6 meet students where they are, support them in the
7 ways that they need so that they can be successful on
8 their own terms, not through a one-size-fits-all
9 approach, but through flexibility, responsiveness,
10 and care.

11 For some, FYCSI is the only way students are able
12 to attend college, have stable housing, and feel
13 supported rather than alone. We strive to ensure
14 that our students recognize their inherent value and
15 potential, that they are met with care and dignity,
16 and that their big and small achievements are seen
17 and celebrated.

18 One of the things we say most often to our
19 students is that they are not alone and that they do
20 not have to navigate college or life alone if they do
21 not want to. FY- exists- FYCSI exists to make that
promise real.

I want to thank the Council for its leadership,
its commitment to equity, and its unwavering advocacy
for these students. I am grateful for the

1
2 opportunity to testify and look forward to continuing
3 this work together. Thank you.

4 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Thank you. I want to take a
5 moment to recognize Council Member Maloney and
6 Council Member Felder. Thank you.

7 INA MENDEZ: Good morning, everyone. Um, my name
8 is Ina Mendez. I'm the Deputy Commissioner for the
9 Division of Family Permanency Services at the
10 Administration for Children's Services. I want to
11 thank my— for your comments. They're really
12 heartfelt. Um, thank you for sharing your story.
13 Shirley, thank you for all your wonderful work and
14 our long, um, serving partnership.

15 I am pleased to be joined today by my colleague
16 Sonia Gonzalez, who is the Executive Director of the
17 Office of College Success Initiatives within my
18 division. Thank you to Chair Stevens and Josephs—
19 and Joseph and the Members of the Children and
20 Families and Higher Education Committees for holding
21 today's oversight hearing on CUNY Pathways for
current and former foster youth.

We appreciate the opportunity to share more
information with you about the supports both ACS and
CUNY provide to young people interested in pursuing 2

1
2 or 4-year college degrees. As you will see, for ACS
3 youth who choose to go to CUNY schools, much of our
4 work is collaborative, and we value our ongoing
5 partnership.

6 Our testimony today will focus on ACS's College
7 Choice Program. The success of youth in foster care
8 is extremely important to us at ACS. This commitment
9 to ensuring young people in our care are able to
10 thrive led to the creation of Fair Futures, a
11 first-of-its-kind program providing over 4,000 young
12 people in foster care and the juvenile justice system
13 who are between the ages of 11 and 26 with tutoring
14 and coaching to build life skills, set academic and
15 career goals, and to provide ongoing support for
16 youth.

17 ACS has partnered with Chapin Hall to evaluate
18 the implementation and outcomes of Fair Futures.
19 Their December 2025 outcomes study report found that
20 Fair Futures participants generally exhibited
21 stronger persistence in school and higher graduation
rates than comparable youth. The success we are
seeing with Fair Futures goes firsthand with our
commitment to ensure that a young person in our care

1
2 wants to pursue a college education. We will help
3 that young person thrive.

4 Today, over 471 youth are participating in
5 College Choice, more than doubling the size of the
6 program, which served 200 when it began in October
7 2022. After hearing from young people that they
8 wanted more choices about where they went to school
9 and what type of housing they secured, and that they
10 needed a stipend to be able to support themselves
11 while focusing on their studies, College Choice was
12 created, building off our prior successful
13 initiatives, including the CUNY Dorm Project and the
14 Fostering College Success Initiative.

15 College Choice was specifically designed for
16 students in foster care interested in pursuing a 2 or
17 4-year college degree. The program includes funding
18 for the following: so tuition— ACS covers up to
19 \$15,000 a year towards tuition and mandatory fees
20 that are not covered by the student's financial aid
21 award. We have found that this covers most, if not
all, the costs for youth, as youth in care have
access to several other college supports.

Shirley mentioned Fostering Youth College Success
Initiative, which our CUNY colleagues will be

1 discussing more fully, as well as the federal JFE
2 Education and Training Vouchers, ETVs, which has
3 recently extended the program age limit so students
4 may now qualify until their 26th birthday. Housing:
5 ACS will cover up to \$30,000 a year for housing.
6 Youth are able to choose to live in on-campus
7 housing, live in off-campus private housing, live in
8 their own apartment, or remain in their foster care
9 placement.

10 ACS, the youth's foster care agency, and New York
11 Foundling work closely with each youth to help them
12 decide and find their best option. Stipend and
13 direct cash assistance: ACS provides the youth with
14 \$60 a day while the youth is in school each semester
15 and during summer session. A Fair Futures Coach.
16 Youth can keep their Fair Futures Coach up to the age
17 of 26. Supporting— support through New York
18 Foundling: ACS recently completed an RFP process to
19 contract with a provider to serve both as a fiscal
20 conduit to pay schools and landlords and to
21 coordinate academic advisement and other support
services to ensure students who need extra support
are able to remain on path towards degree completion.
On-going support: ACS provides year-round housing

1
2 costs and the stipend up to 6 months post-graduation,
3 all of which helps youth graduating from college
4 successfully transition to independence outside the
5 college setting.

6 During the summer, ACS will continue to provide
7 support for housing, tuition, and stipends for youth
8 enrolled in summer courses, pursuant to their college
9 dorm guidelines. About 60% of the youth in College
Choice elect to continue the program during the
summer.

10 College Choice has been very successful. Most
11 importantly, we have youth— we have seen more youth
12 participate each year— each year, sorry. Due to the
13 success, as part of the Fiscal Year '26 budget, we
14 received an increase in funding for College Choice,
15 which is funded at \$15.7 million in fiscal year '26
and will be increased in baseline starting in fiscal
year '27 to \$18.8 million.

16 Currently, 301 of the 479 youth, 63%, attend
17 CUNY. The remaining students attend a variety of
18 schools such as the University of Albany, Penn State
19 University, NYU, Morgan State University, Xavier
20 University in Louisiana, DePaul University, and this
21

1
2 year we have a student attending Scotland
3 Conservatory of Music.

4 ACS is committed to supporting youth complete
5 their college credits. We offer 15 semesters of
6 support, which is more than most financial aid
7 packages offer. We have found that our students
8 typically earn their 4-year degree in 5 to 5.5 years.
9 College Choice does require students to maintain a
10 cumulative GPA of 2.0, which aligns with college,
11 university, and financial aid eligibility standards.
12 Our goal is to support youth dur- during any
13 challenges. So we work with each student
14 individually so that as long as they're interested in
15 staying in school, College Choice will continue to
16 support the young person.

17 For some students, the traditional college
18 pathway is not the right fit, so we may connect them
19 to alternative options, including our new Career
20 Choice program that provides vocational and job
21 training assistance and other resources like a
stipend. Much like the, ah, national average, we
find that approximately approximately 30% of the
youth in College Choice do not persist in college.
By and large, however, students in College Choice in

1
2 the CUNY program have been very successful. Let me
3 tell you about a couple of students.

4 We currently have a College Choice student who is
5 on track to graduate this May with a Bachelor of
6 Science in Social Work from York College. LH's
7 progress reflects significant growth over time. She
8 began the program during the pandemic while also
9 adjusting to starting college. Initially entering the
10 program with a 1.2 GPA. Through consistent effort,
11 engagement with tutoring, academic support, and
12 active engagement in social-emotional services, she
13 raised her GPA to a 2.83 by the end of the spring
14 2025 semester and remained on track ever since.

15 Outside of school, she works at the Ali Forney
16 Center, a 24-hour program that supports homeless
17 LGBTQ+ and other at-risk youth by providing shelter,
18 food, and comprehensive services. In her role as
19 caseworker, she continues to stay fully engaged in
20 school while managing her professional
21 responsibilities. She is also preparing to move into
her own apartment in Brooklyn on May 1st.

19 Another student, SM, attends Hostos Community
20 College, majoring in digital music and sound design.
21 He is a second-year student and an active member of

1
2 the College Choice Support Services program offered
3 by New York Foundling. He is on track to earn his
4 associate's degree in May and plans to continue his
5 education at CUNY— at City College, excuse me. He is
6 interested in pursuing study abroad opportunities to
7 expand both his academic and personal experience. He
8 currently holds a 2.8 GPA and is working very hard to
9 end the school year with a 3.0. He was featured in
10 New York Foundling's College Choice Support Services
11 February 2026 newsletter, and he left advice for his
12 fellow students: stay consistent, ask for help early,
13 and remember that progress matters more than
14 perfection. We couldn't agree more.

15 In conclusion, I wanna thank the Council for your
16 commitment to the success of youth in ACS's care, to
17 thank CUNY and New York Foundling for their
18 invaluable partnership in making College Choice
19 successful. And most of all to the youth who are
20 working so hard to obtain their college degrees to
21 build successful lives. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Thank you. I'd like to
recognize Council Member Brewer. That's it with the
testimony?

INEZ MENDEZ: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Alright. Okay. I'd also like to recognize we've been joined by Council-- the noisy Council Member Restler. Sounds about right. Um, first question. We learned in the Preliminary Budget Hearing that the number of students with a background in foster care enrolled at CUNY was just 65 students in 2016. By academic year 2025, there were 489.

Right now there are 572 enrolled across 19 undergraduate campuses. What is the enrollment by campus, and how do you account for differences among the campuses?

SHIRLEY DE PENA: So we, we have the numbers by campus, but we also have them to, to provide them to you. I don't know if you want me to go through all of them since they're 19 schools.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Um, do you have them on a sheet?

SHIRLEY DE PENA: We have them on a sheet to provide to you as well.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Okay, you wanna take that? Do you have the breakdown?

1
2 SHIRLEY DE PENA: I have it on a sheet. I can, I
3 can fix it and give it to you guys, but it's right
4 here.

5 Um, so students get to decide the college that
6 they want to attend. Um, and so we leave it open to
7 the students. Most of our students are at the
8 community colleges, um, while a smaller number are at
9 the senior colleges. That list right there gives you
10 the breakdown by college, by campus.

11 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Um, how are students
12 identified, um, with the background of foster care
13 when they arrive on campus? Are they then tracked
14 centrally or by campus so that they don't get lost in
15 the system?

16 SHIRLEY DE PENA: So we identify students in a
17 number of ways because we don't want anyone to fall
18 through the cracks. So part of the ways that we
19 identify students is we do presentations. We'll do
20 presentations on Zoom. We'll do presentations in
21 person for foster care agencies, for high schools,
um, for anyone, um, for the state. Sometimes they'll
do presentations so that the more people— we've done
presentations for foster parents. So the more that

1
2 people know about the program, we can identify
3 students.

4 We also have queries that we can- that we
5 generate from our data folks that will tell us who is
6 potentially eligible based on the question in the
7 FAFSA that asks about foster care status. Once we
8 identify those students, we send them an email that
9 says, hey, you may be eligible, and we send them the
10 application.

11 The FYCSI application is also connected to the
12 TAP application. So if students identify as foster
13 youth on the TAP application, they get flagged and
14 are told about FYCSI and can, uh, submit an
15 application. And we recently redid our FYCSI flyers
16 that are posted at all 19 campuses that have a QR
17 code so that students don't have to out themselves if
18 they don't want to. They don't have to identify
19 themselves to anyone. They can be standing in a
20 hallway, see this flyer, know that it's for foster
21 youth, snap the picture of the QR code, and it takes
them right to the application.

22 So we've tried to find lots of different ways to
23 identify students. Um, and those are all of the ways
24 in which we do that. And then once we do identify

1
2 them and the state confirms their eligibility, they
3 are coded so that we can track them throughout CUNY.
4 And with the help of our, um, data folks at CUNY. We
5 track them centrally, we track them at each college,
6 and so we can catch them once they transfer as well.

7 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Is that same flyer posted
8 at, um, foster care agencies as well?

9 SHIRLEY DE PENA: I believe we sent it to ACS.
10 If I didn't, I will send it, but I believe we sent it
11 to ACS so that we can push the word out as much as
12 possible.

13 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: How about, um, the Office of
14 Foster Care with New York City Public Schools, since
15 a lot of our students is the pipeline um, New York
16 City Public School is the pipeline to a lot of the
17 CUNY students. Is that also being office at the--
18 offered at the Office for Foster Care?

19 SHIRLEY DE PENA: I don't think it is, but we can
20 make sure to get it over to them.

21 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Okay, and we'll be checking.
Um, does CUNY provide service through Foster Youth
College Success Initiatives, or FYCSI, to all foster
youth who enroll? If not, why not? And what has

1
2 been the trend in the number of students who receive
3 services over the past year? Over the past 5 years?

4 SHIRLEY DE PENA: So we— if a student is found
5 eligible, um, they, they become a part of the
6 program. So once students apply, the eligibility
7 requirement is very simple. It's current foster
8 youth, former, as long as you were in care at the age
9 of 13 and 1 day. We do happen to have some students
10 that don't apply, so we just keep targeting them and
11 reaching out to them, letting them know that they're—
12 letting them know that they're eligible. Some
13 students just don't apply, and so while we know
14 they're eligible, if they don't apply, we can't
15 support them.

16 Um, other than that, once a student is found
17 eligible, we provide them the supports. And the
18 numbers have trended upwards, as you've said, over
19 the past 5 years. When the program first started, we
20 only had 65 students in the program, and that was
21 largely because students who were in the program had
to also be in College Discovery or SEEK only, or an
EOP at the state level, or HEOP. And then it
expanded beyond to include all college students. And
so consistently the numbers have trended upwards. In

1
2 FY '23, we had 389 students. In FY '24, we had 489
3 students. FY '25, we had 614 students. And
4 currently this semester, we have 572, 76. But we'll
5 know more about this year once the academic year is—

6 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: This question is for ACS.
7 How many college students do you have in the system?
8 Because to me, that number is still low based on the
9 amount of students that's in care?

10 INA MENDEZ: Right, so between the ages of 18 to
11 21, if you look at that as college age, we have 745
12 youth in care. Of those youth, we have 471 this
13 semester in College Choice. However, they don't all
14 attend CUNY, they attend different schools, as I
15 mentioned.

16 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: And what kind of support do
17 they have when they attend a school outside of the
18 CUNY system?

19 INA MENDEZ: So if they attend school outside of
20 the CUNY system, they continue to get um, their case
21 planning offered by the foster care agency. They're
eligible for a Fair Future Coach, so they continue to
work with them. Maybe it has to be remote, but
there's still expectations that visits and support,
and that they're making connections with those that

1
2 are around them, um, at their university. Let's say
3 they're going to University of Albany. We're also
4 working very closely with New York Foundling. They
5 won the RFP award for our College Choice Support
6 Services Program, CCSP, um, and in that they help us
7 support the payment process for, you know, the
8 bursar's bills and all of those things, but also
9 provide additional support to the young person—
10 academic advisement, if they need a tutor, they'll
11 make sure that they're connected to social-emotional
12 programs. Sometimes our youth will continue with
13 therapy.

14 So New York Foundling provides that added layer
15 of support. So we put that in place to support our
16 young people, you know, wherever they're attending
17 school.

18 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: And they also provide
19 housing because I did see a great housing for foster
20 age— foster youth.

21 INA MENDEZ: So the youth that when they go to
care— when they go to care, they're in care when they
go to school, excuse me, um, we work with them to
identify what is the place, best place for them to
live. So some will live in a dorm setting. Some

1 universities have their own housing, but it's off
2 campus. They may decide to live there. Some young
3 people stay within their foster care placement. So
4 we work with them, but we do provide support.
5 College Choice pays up to \$30,000 a year in housing.

6 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Um, we understand that
7 funding is allocated to campuses based on the number
8 of eligible FYSCI students who are enrolled, thus
9 allowing funding to follow the student. How does
10 CUNY Central Administration ensure that FYCSI
11 programming and supports are consistent and of equal
12 quality across CUNY campuses?

13 SHIRLEY DE PENA: So because the funds are held
14 centrally, we send the funds to each campus based
15 upon the number of students that they have. And so
16 that way we can ensure that funding is at the
17 campuses for the students that are there. Um, so we
18 have campuses with large numbers of students that
19 most of the funding would be there, and we have some
20 campuses with smaller numbers of students, so less of
21 the funding is there. But then we track the funding
and we ensure that the funding gets to the student
and their tuitions are paid and they're getting their
FYCSI awards as well.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: And if a student decides to attend a SUNY school, how do you work together with the SUNY school to provide the same level of support?

SHIRLEY DE PENA: So for FYCSI, um, because FYCSI is at the SUNY schools as well, I will-- we'll call our counterparts or we'll call OCFS and say this student is transferring to Albany.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Mhm.

SHIRLEY DE PENA: And so then they'll-- they were found eligible at Baruch, but now they're transferring to Albany. And so they'll know that the student is eligible at Albany and they'll put the student up there.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: With the same level of care?

SHIRLEY DE PENA: For FYCSI. Uh, this-- the individual SUNY school, if I'm not mistaken, will provide the supports that they provide to the schools. They don't centralize their program the way CUNY does.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Yeah, I know they do have a foster, a foster youth program. I just wanted to see if there was overlap and if there's collaboration between the two systems.

SHIRLEY DE PENA: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Um, what dedicated staff offices or point of contact exist on CUNY campuses to support students who've been in foster care? How different are they from campus to campus?

SHIRLEY DE PENA: So we have, um, I sit centrally, but I work with the financial aid and Bursar's offices to identify the students and make sure they know who their students are. And from time to time, I'll also work with, for example, the level-- the Office of Student Affairs at the individual campuses when, um, we need to continue or to, uh, increase the level of support for a student.

Um, so it would depend on the campus, but the larger campuses have the, the most number of students, and so we're most in contact with them as well.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: And how often do you meet to go over trends that you're seeing in the system or little hiccups that you're seeing in the system? How often do you meet?

SHIRLEY DE PENA: With the--

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: With the campuses.

SHIRLEY DE PENA: With the campuses? So I meet with the campuses regularly, and I'm always in

1
2 communication over email because that's how we get
3 the funding out.

4 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Okay. Um, what is the
5 retention rate for students receiving FY- FYCSI
6 support? What has been the trend in retention rate
7 for students who receive services over the past 5
8 years?

9 SHIRLEY DE PENA: So the retention rate has gone
10 up as our- as our numbers have gone up as well. Um,
11 like I said, we are- our data folks are still working
12 on the actual retention numbers, and we can give that
13 to you later. But the retentions have- the retention
14 is going up, and everything is trending upwards, as
15 with our graduation rates.

16 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Yeah, we want to make sure
17 young people are getting the support and staying.
18 And if they don't, how do you go back and do outreach
19 to get them back?

20 SHIRLEY DE PENA: So we'll- we check, uh,
21 registration for students both, um, several weeks
into the fall, several weeks into the spring and over
the summer, and we'll regularly reach out to students
who are not, who are not registered for that semester

1
2 to let them know that we'll be here when they come
3 back or if they decide to come back.

4 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: And how do you remove some
5 of- if they tell you, hey, I have a- this is the
6 issue, how do you support that?

7 SHIRLEY DE PENA: So it depends. Usually the
8 issues are financial, so students will have a, uh,
9 like a bursar hold because they owe money at a
10 school. And so one of the things that we do at CUNY
11 that we make sure happens is that we remove- we can
12 cover past balances, prior balances. So if a student
13 can't attend school because they owe funds at either
14 that same school that they want to come back to or a
15 different school, I will get in touch with whichever
16 one it is, the school, to say the student is coming
17 back. We need to remove the hold so that they can
18 register, and then we'll cover the past balance and
19 any current balances that might- because of the
20 instability sometimes about foster youth, sometimes
21 they are the first to go to college and don't have
that support.

Um, so therefore that's why we asking how much
support is provided and when they do fall through the
cracks sometime, how- what is- what does that

1 outreach look like? How do we get them back?
2 Whether it's, um, any, any, um, programming. Because
3 we want to make sure our foster youth are graduating
4 as well. We don't want them just to go to college to
5 go to college, but we want them to also graduate,
6 have meaningful lives. Um, so what's the graduation
7 rate for students receiving FY, um, CSI support, what
8 has been the trend in graduation rates for students
9 who receive services over the past 5 years?

10 SHIRLEY DE PENA: So-

11 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: And I'm gonna- and I'm gonna
12 add another piece to that. Once they finish, is
13 there support in helping them find pathways to
14 careers?

15 SHIRLEY DE PENA: So approximately 31%- so our
16 trends for graduation are going up. Approximately
17 31% of all students served over the past, um, 10
18 years have, have already completed a degree. And as
19 I said before, some have completed multiple degrees.
20 What we also try to do, because with the support of
21 our social work interns, that case management, we
connect students who are coming out of college. So
we are working with them to see what their next step
is, if it's a job, if it's graduate school, um, and

1 we try to make sure that they're connected
2 post-graduation with our program. But FYCSI stops at
3 the bachelor's level, but we try to make sure when
4 they come out they've got some support.

5 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Is that with um, career,
6 career advisement, um, internship placement if
7 necessary. Certain fields require internship,
8 apprenticeship, mentorship. Is all that included in
that as well?

9 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Yes. So we have programming
10 that's specific to careers, for example. So we'll
11 send out information throughout the year, even not
12 just to students who are graduating, because the
13 student might step out and need a job. Um, so we're
14 always sending out information to students around
15 careers, making sure students know the resources that
16 are available to them in those ways, connecting them
17 to their career counseling centers at the CUNY campus
as well, because that's the— you know, they do a
really good job of supporting our students in that.

18 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Is that also with resume
19 writing and-?

20 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Yes interview skills.
21

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Mock interview skills.
Okay, I'm gonna pass it over to Council Member
Stevens, and then I'll come back.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Hello, good morning. Um, I
just had a follow-up question, um, because the
numbers that you gave, I just wanted to know around
the program, um, and for the colleges. I see like,
um, BMCC has like 188 students, but like your college
has 7. Is there like— do each college do like its own
recruitment? Um, have— is there a reason why there's
like inconsistencies? I see like everyone else is
kind of like more around the same, but those two were
just kind of glaring to me. Just wanted some
clarification.

SHIRLEY DE PENA: We learn of our students once
they're already generally at the college. So we
don't work on like where do they go to school. Once
they've applied, then we'll, we'll know who they are.
So I'm not— I—

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Are you guys like seeing
any trends? Is it because more of them are like in
the city or they have better pro— like, yeah, is that
like— because I'm just wondering, like, if we see
that, you know, a lot of folks are going to BMCC,

1
2 like, what are they doing that like something like
3 your college could do? And are we looking at those
4 trends or even considering it? Is it that like maybe
5 it's too far or whatever? I don't- I'm not sure. I
6 just would love for us to, like, think about that, of
7 thinking, like, okay, well, what- why is there such a
8 big difference?

9 SHIRLEY DE PENA: I will- I usually- sometimes
10 I'll work with the admissions offices to see if they
11 want us to come in and have presentations around
12 FYCSI for students, because it's also about knowing
13 that there are foster youth there as well. And I
14 don't know that they're, you know, what, what the
15 outreach is for foster youth at the campus.

16 So we'll do that sometimes as well. And that's
17 also something that we've looked at, um, but the
18 trends- I, I, I think that BMCC is also one of our
19 bigger community colleges, so that might also be why
20 the numbers are higher there as well.

21 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, I would just love for
us to like kind of think about that and make sure
that like maybe there- some schools are not as nice
or they're not as welcoming, right, or have the
information as available. Like, I think that there's

1
2 probably something there we should look into it.
3 Nothing— it's bad, maybe it's something good, maybe
4 just BMCC, or you like it there, I don't know, just
5 thinking. I just was looking at the numbers and that
6 just kind of glared out to me.

7 SHIRLEY DE PENA; Yes.

8 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Um, I guess, um, these—
9 some of the questions are for ACS. Over the past 5
10 years, how many youth have aged out of foster care
11 annually, and what percentage of those youth were
12 enrolled in college?

13 INA MENDEZ: Thank you for your question. So
14 I'll break it down year by year, and then I can give
15 you the total numbers so you can see the trends. So
16 in 2021, 533 youth aged out of care, 79 were in
17 college. 15%.

18 In 2022, we had 500, um, youth aging out of care.
19 90 were in college, 18% overall. 2023, 429 youth
20 aged out of care. 68 were in college, which was 16%.
21 In 2024, 382 aged out of care. 82 were in college,
22 21 per— which was 21% of the population. And in
23 2025, 358 youth aged out of care. 84 were enrolled
24 in college, which is 23%.

1
2 So we are seeing that the number of children
3 aging out of care is going down, which is a data
4 trend we like. And we're also seeing that the
5 percentage going to college is increasing. Yeah,
6 small steps, but we're getting there.

7 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Baby steps. It's all you
8 could ask for. How, um, how are, um, eligible
9 students informed about the programs such as College
10 Choice, FYCSI, and Fair Futures, and what steps are
11 being taken to increase awareness and participation?

12 INA MENDEZ: So for the kids in care, um, we do a
13 lot of work obviously with our foster care providers.
14 They are doing all of the case planning.

15 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Mhm.

16 INA MENDEZ: So we hold a lot of information
17 sessions. Sonia and her team, and she can talk a
18 little bit more, will talk to agency case planners.
19 Agencies have educational specialists. They have
20 what we call preparing youth for adulthood, which is
21 a specialist that really focuses on building into
independent living skills. If we know children are
not being adopted, going home, or Kin Gap. We really
wanna prepare them for their adulthood.

1
2 So agencies have these, um, key point people. So
3 they're educated around College Choice, the
4 requirements, what it looks like. Um, we also work,
5 as I mentioned, with the, with the case planners, and
6 then agencies have Fair Future coaches. They're
7 responsible for hiring their coaches. We partner
8 with the Center for Fair Futures who provides the
9 training and the technical assistance. So all of
10 this information about College Choice, our workforce
11 development programs, our summer youth employment,
12 um, are communicated with these professionals, and
13 it's their responsibility to engage young people.

14 We also have a very close relationship with the
15 foster care office at New York City Public Schools.
16 Um, in terms of the flyer about, um, FYSE, um,
17 fostering FYCSY, we do have that. We share that
18 information with them and also about College Choice.
19 So we do a lot of outreach, a lot of, um, um,
20 information sessions, providing information to
21 providers to make sure they're aware of how, um, you
can get young people into College Choice and then the
benefits.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I am positive that we're
gonna have young people testify today that there is

1
2 inconsistencies. And even with all that effort that
3 you just explained, that they're still not getting
4 the information. And so what are we doing? Because
5 I know when I had a roundtable, young people
6 suggested, like, not just relying solely on the
7 providers of, like, how do we get this information to
8 them directly? Because um, even when we had a
9 roundtable, I remember that they started doing case
10 management with each other and telling each other
11 about the programs because every agency ain't the
12 same. And so how do we get to a place where the
13 consistency is across the board and that young people
14 can also access it without, you know, always having
15 the barrier of the, the agency who often does not do
16 the legwork that these young people- and, and, and
17 the reality is even was there, I was like, well,
18 clearly y'all should just be working in the agencies
19 because y'all doing the job right now.

20 Like, I mean, literally giving up- like, no, you
21 didn't know you're eligible for a laptop? Oh, you
should go here. Oh, let me give you this website.
And that- and there's young people like, what are you
talking about? I don't know what you're talking
about.

1
2 INA MENDEZ: So that's, you know, not what we
3 want to hear, but we can always do-

4 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Positive.

5 INA MENDEZ: No, no.

6 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: So many heads shaking back
7 there, and I think- and they're all going to come
8 testify after to say yeah.

9 INA MENDEZ: And I would love to hear more, you
10 know, about like which agency for the youth that are
11 currently in care and, and how they get the
12 information.

13 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I'll tell you, I promise
14 you.

15 INA MENDEZ: No, I'm not- no, I, uh, absolutely.
16 So one of the things we do, we do have at ACS the
17 Youth Leadership Council. So for example, on
18 Saturday they're having what we call a hype event.
19 This is a youth-led information forum. We've invited
20 all the youth in care to come to this event. We're
21 going to have information about College Choice Fair
Futures.

So I think what you're- based on what you're
saying, I think we need to hold more of these types
of events because it's youth, like, the youth are

1
2 talking about the programs and, and how to get more
3 information. And maybe we need to leverage some
4 other, um, tools, maybe social media, our website
5 that we can share information.

6 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: It's terrible. It's not
7 good. It's no, it's not good. It's not good. If I
8 was a young person, I wouldn't go in there. And I'm
9 old and I'm like, it's terrible. So, yeah.

10 INA MENDEZ: So, so we're gonna work on those
11 things, um, and, um, and we'll, we'll coordinate with
12 Stephanie and maybe we'll have the Youth Leadership
13 Council. They can give us some information about--
14 maybe, maybe they could help us monitor it.

15 So anyway, but I think those are the, um, the
16 ways to make sure that youth have the information
17 directly, and that way we're not relying on if
18 there's a, uh, uh, somehow there's a gap in, in--

19 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, one of them suggests
20 that, um, like having some type of app that young
21 people can just download and have access to all the
information. But it's the city and we don't believe
in technology, so I was just like, that's probably
not gonna happen. So we know technology is terrible
in the city.

1
2 INA MENDEZ: So yeah, we did look at creating--
3 well, that's another story. We did look at creating
4 an app at one point and it didn't get to where we
5 wanted to, but I think, um, there's been some, um,
6 easement in how to use social media. And so we'll
7 look at that and then we can talk to the young people
8 about what might be a way to share information. And
9 many agencies have different types of youth forums,
10 and we can make sure that we're sharing that
11 information with those that host the youth forums.

12 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I'm sure they're gonna give
13 us suggestions when they come up to testify, so just
14 be ready to take some notes, 'cause I, I take notes.
15 I don't-- listen, young people do my social media.
16 How, um, how are eligible students informed about
17 program-- oh, I asked that. What, um, formal
18 communications and coordination and mechanisms exist
19 with CUNY and ACS to identify, track, and support
20 students, um, with foster care experience while they
21 are enrolled in CUNY institutions?

18 INA MENDEZ: So in terms of kids that are in
19 College Choice, and Sonia can talk more about her
20 relationship with, with CUNY, one of the things we do
21 when children are accepted into College Choice, we

1 ask them to apply for all of the different, um,
2 programs, scholarships, financial aid. So if you're
3 in foster care, you're going to be enrolled in the,
4 um, FYCSI program and then Sonia has— and working
5 with New York Foundling, we have a database, so we're
6 able to track every student and where they're going
7 to school. And then there's constant conversation
8 and types of follow-up. So that's how we kind of
9 continue to work together.

10 So if, you know, young people are struggling and
11 maybe they need some additional support, we're able
12 to make— reach out to the agencies and get that
13 information, um, to the kid and get the young person
14 the services they need. But Sonia can talk more
15 about the coordination.

16 SONIA GONZALEZ: Mhm. Good afternoon— morning.

17 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, something.

18 SONIA GONZALEZ: Hi, we're here. Um, I mean,
19 Shirley and I coordinate consistently on the students
20 who are enrolled at, uh, in College Choice and at
21 CUNY. Um, we actually just had a conversation this
morning on the way up about a student that we need to
support today. Um, but through our application
process, um, just like Ina said, we make sure that

1 students are applying for the grants and scholarships
2 that they're eligible for, particularly FYSE. We ask
3 them to submit the, er, proof of enroll- proof of
4 application to FYSE to make sure that they can access
5 those benefits. And that opens up the doors for
6 resources and the collaboration for us to ensure
7 students are connected to the resources at CUNY. But
8 then also if there are other issues that arise, we
9 work closely with the provider agencies, their
10 coaches, their specialists to make sure that concerns
11 are addressed timely.

12 Um, whether it's social-emotional, whether it's
13 housing, whether it's academic, um, um, supports that
14 are needed. We also, as you know, you heard several
15 times, we have New York Foundling, who is a support
16 service provider, and they are also our, our ears on
17 the ground, our boots on the ground. They support
18 our students, um, who are in college, just helping
19 them to navigate that complexity of, um, being in
20 foster care and also being at a higher education
21 institution.

19 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Since ACS launched the
20 College Choice program in 2022 and expanded in 2025,
21 what metrics are being used to evaluate program

1 success, like enrollment, persistence, graduation,
2 um, and employment outcomes? Are there plans to
3 future expand the program? And if so, what is the
4 anticipated timeline and scale of that expansion?

5 INA MENDEZ: So since the program started in
6 2022, we had 200, um, youth in care, and now this
7 semester we have 471. So we definitely are tracking
8 enrollment. We're also tracking persistence, and I
9 believe that in terms of children that continue, 75%
10 of those young people continued on. We've had 9% of
11 our students that are enrolled in CUNY graduate,
12 which was 27. And then, um, the remaining students
13 we continue to support.

14 Overall, we see about a 30% dropout rate, which
15 somewhat aligns with kind of, you know, normal— not
16 normal, but outside of foster care populations.
17 Excuse me. Um, we continue to also track, like, the
18 type of school, um, they are attending, their GPA.
19 It's very important that we pay attention to the GPA.
20 And then also looking at, um, the length of time it
21 takes them to complete their degree.

Sonia, are there any of the other data elements
we track— and we have a huge database.

1
2 SONIA GONZALEZ: You mentioned, um, enrollment,
3 persistence, and graduation rates are the, the
4 baseline metrics that we track in College Choice.
5 Um, we also track the graduation status and what we
6 don't necessarily on a long-term basis track where
7 are they employed. But because we offer them the
8 post-grad stipend for 6 months after graduation, and
9 they have to apply for that post-grad stipend, um,
10 once they graduate and provide their diploma and
11 their final transcript, we do track wit]

12 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Stipend.

13 SONIA GONZALEZ: \$60 a day.

14 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Oh.

15 SONIA GONZALEZ: So \$60 a day for 7 days a week.
16 And our graduates get that for 6 months after
17 graduation.

18 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Like the counsel.

19 SONIA GONZALEZ: Um, and so our students do, on
20 the application, tell us what their plans are for
21 after graduation. So some of them are going to grad
school, some of them are going employment, some of
them are, um, you know, embarking on internship
opportunities.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, it's a good way to
make people come back and stay connected.

INA MENDEZ: Wait, just so— just to piggyback,
you asked about expansion, plans for expansion. So
when the program started, it was funded at around \$10
million this fiscal year, fiscal year 2026, we were
able to increase the funding to \$15 million, like
\$15.6 million, and then we will baseline \$18.7
million in fiscal year '27. So we are going— the
goal this year was to serve 430. We exceeded that
goal, but next year we'll be budgeted to serve up to
530 kids, if not more.

And because of how the funding works, and
depending on the scholarships and the financial aid
need, we can sometimes support more children within
the budget because one child may not have as—

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: As much—

INA MENDEZ: Right, exactly.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, understood. Um, what
percentage of foster care youth who enroll in College
Choice programs attend a CUNY institution, and what
are the percentages of— and graduation rate of those
students?

1
2 SHIRLEY DE PENA: It's 63% of the children that
3 are currently in College Choice attend a CUNY school.

4 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I have more questions, but
5 I'll pass it over so we can not talk about it. Yes,
6 okay.

7 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Um, Council Member Epstein.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER EPSTEIN: Thank you, Chairs. Um,
9 and thank you all for being here. Um, so, Ms.
10 Wallace, can I ask you a couple of questions? So,
11 um, it'd be good to know from your experience of this
12 process, 'cause going through it, um, kind of what
13 your experience was. Um, so, you know, I know you
14 mentioned getting your GED. How, how was that
15 process? Were there people there who helped you
16 along the way? Like, what were the barriers that you
17 experienced to get your GED?

18 MCKEEMA WALLACE: Um, yes, so when first, um,
19 gaining my GED, it was very difficult. I think I
20 failed the math like twice, um, by 5 points because
21 you would need 500 to actually go on. Um, but it
wasn't until I got into like college when I got my
GED where I started to see like resources and support
for academically.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER EPSTEIN: So you- if you had
3 gotten support resources earlier -

4 MCKEEMA WALLACE: If I had - oh my gosh, yeah,
5 I'd get a high school diploma, a certificate, I'd get
6 you everything I could.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER EPSTEIN: And, and applying to
8 college, what pro- what was that process like for
9 you? Like, just making the decision to apply. Did
10 you get support in that process when you were
11 applying to college?

12 MCKEEMA WALLACE: Um, so when I got to Gram Slam
13 which is, um, like for alumni in the foster care
14 system. They, um, they gave me different
15 alternatives. Like, they didn't, like, budget me in
16 and say, you can't go to- like, um, I remember Alex
17 and Shirley constantly- I kept saying, I want to go
18 to Hunter. Now, mind you, I'm in Queensborough
19 Community College, but I'm gonna go to Hunter. And I
20 always felt like that was more of a prestige school
21 than I wouldn't. But surely enough, Shirley and Alex
22 didn't lie. I got into Hunter, and I'm there right
23 now.

24 So I think, um, with that support and just
25 constant- because again, like you guys said, like,

1 um, Chair Steven said, you know, that you— when you
2 don't have that support or someone kind of letting
3 you know, um, hey, this is where you go, FIC has
4 this, Shirley's here, uh, Chair Joseph, Chair Epstein
5 has this— when you don't have those, someone directly
6 telling you, you don't know.

7 So it was really great to come into that program
8 and they kind of just opened my horizons to so many
9 things. I no longer felt like I had to stay at
10 Queensborough Community College. I was so much more,
11 like, um, determined and I felt so much more
12 confident when going to school because I was going to
13 a school that I actually wanted to go to. So—

14 COUNCIL MEMBER EPSTEIN: So just if I can ask one
15 more question. So just to think through the gaps
16 that we're just trying to feel like it, 'cause we're
17 worried about young people like you falling through
18 these kind of, these gaps. Um, it seems like there
19 were moments like applying for the GED, getting
20 connected to people. How did you find it? Like, how
21 did those connections work for you? Just someone
told you, hey, college is possible, think about this
program, you can get tuition support? Like, how did
that work for you in your life?

1
2 MCKEEMA WALLACE: Um, I, I think, um, one, one
3 way was definitely I had great social workers around
4 me, so they were always someone that was, um, like,
5 that I looked up to. But mainly, um, having- like I
6 said, being able to receive laptops, being able to
7 receive, um, transportation, having my coach reach
8 out to me, um, every once a week and say, hey,
9 McKeema, I just wanna know, are you, you know, you
10 know, we have these things going on. Do you know
11 that this is here?

12 COUNCIL MEMBER EPSTEIN: Mhm.

13 MCKEEMA WALLACE: Um, a lot of the things that, a
14 lot of the information that I did receive was because
15 of a, a coach that was provided to me by- I will be
16 honest with you, Chair, um, Epstein, I did not
17 receive the full educational services I deserved.
18 Until I got into FYC- FYCSI. FYCI. I, I'm sorry,
19 I'm all- yeah, um, so it, it was literally- and, and
20 I'm not just saying that, uh, like I said, I had
21 Graham Slam prior when getting my GED, and I failed
that about twice. I had to kind of do that on my
own. It wasn't- and I, I did that because I wanted
to get into the dorm project. I wanted to go to
school.

1
2 So they told me, hey, if you get your GED, if you
3 get your high school diploma, we can connect you to
4 that. So that was like my big determination because
5 I knew once I got there, then housing stability,
6 everything else I needed would fall into line as far
as just surviving and being able to do my education.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER EPSTEIN: Do you think other kids
8 in foster care get that information? Because
9 obviously what you're saying is really important.
10 Like, you saw there was a future for you because you
11 saw college as a pathway forward. Do you think other
kids in foster care know that this is available to
them, or, or when are they--

12 MCKEEMA WALLACE: I'm gonna be honest with you,
13 um, Chair Epstein, a lot of them, uh, don't. I've
14 met, like, and not because Shirley isn't, most of the
15 time, especially when you're coming from that
16 environment of not having a support system of school
17 constantly or repetitively, it's like you, you have
18 to try to find your own way. And luckily we have,
19 like, we have students like myself or others or like
20 for me, when Shirley would come out to the schools
21 and talk to us about it, that was something that gave
me the insight.

1
2 Um, like she says, they have QR- uh, QRO codes
3 now. So anytime I see something, especially that
4 says foster youth, knowing that I'm in foster care
5 and I press it, it's a- it's very easier to like
6 apply, get the information.

7 Um, something that I wish that I did have in like
8 ACS, like the Graham Windom, was my FYC aside coach
9 and Shirley. I felt like if I may have had them in
10 my beginning stages for high school wanting to go to
11 college, it would have been different because she has
12 already painted that picture afterwards. But can you
13 imagine before if I got to meet her?

14 So, um, that's something that I, I really pray
15 and hope that one day, foster care agencies, do allow
16 them to come do- come speak to the high schoolers.
17 Not, you know, when they just get to college, but
18 before then, because that's going to make them want
19 to go. I wanted to be, like I said, a social worker.
20 And that was enough for me to see her with her
21 button-up shirts and her cool outfits, and that was
22 enough for me. That was it. So I, I, I think if
23 others got that insight, it would, it would help a
24 lot.

1
2 INA MENDEZ: So if I could just jump in,
3 everything she, um, Ms. Wallace is saying is really
4 important. It's one of the reasons why we started
5 the Fair Futures program in 2019. And so for young
6 people ages 11, they get a— they get a tutor, they
7 have access to tutoring, and the program is also
8 designed to provide a coach starting at 14. And the
9 coach is a little more on the ground— soon you use
10 the term boots on the ground, um, in terms of like
11 speaking with a young person. It's a mentor, not a
12 mentor. So maybe it's like, oh, I'm interested in
13 playing basketball, they'll connect you. Um, and so
14 these are newer programs, um, that we're growing and
15 over 4,300 young people in 2025 got a coach. But I
16 think the coach can do some of those things and help
17 bridge the gap, spread more— spread information about
18 college or just anything, like, if you're interested
19 in anything else.

20 And so I think, um, I don't think that when you
21 were around that 14-year-old age, I don't know if
they had the Fair Future coach yet, but that's,
that's kind of like how we stepped up to meet that
type of gap.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER EPSTEIN: And Ms. Peña, can I
3 just— one last question if I can. So obviously we
4 have an amazing young person here, and I'm wondering,
5 are there— are you worried there are other young
6 people who are falling through the cracks who are
7 coming into the program or not getting access to the
8 program or applying, getting turned down from the
9 program, that those gaps that are missing to be able
10 to help?

11 SHIRLEY DE PENA: I do, I'm sorry, I often worry
12 about gaps, um, just because I know it's, it's
13 natural, right? We can send an email, people don't
14 read emails. We can send— so there's, there's
15 naturally going to be gaps, and I do worry about
16 that, which is why I try to think like, what are all
17 of the different kinds of ways that we can do the
18 same thing?

19 One of the things that struck me a couple of
20 years ago, I regularly send out emails. McKeema can
21 tell you, I just send out emails and, and people
don't read, like, people don't respond, you know,
students don't respond. And I, and—

COUNCIL MEMBER EPSTEIN: I experienced that too.

1
2 SHIRLEY DE PENA: So, so, you know, I just said,
3 okay, but, but one summer a student needed help and
4 it's a student that had never responded to any of my
5 emails and they called me because they needed help at
6 their campus. And they were like, I don't know if
7 you know me. And I'm like, I know you. Absolutely,
8 I know you, and I helped them. And what it— what it
9 told me in that moment was that even though they
10 didn't respond to my email, they read it maybe, or
11 just knew, like, you know, maybe it was like, I don't
12 need whatever Shirley's talking about today. But
13 they knew who Shirley was, they knew who FYCSI was.
14 And so one of the things that we do with our social
15 work interns, um, you know, sometimes things come to
16 me because somebody does a really good thing and I'm
17 like, oh my God, that's your job from now on.

18 So we had a social work intern write a monthly
19 email to their caseload of students and they said,
20 oh, you know, happy October. And I said, you know
21 what? That's a really good idea because what I
learned over the summer is that even when they don't
respond to you, they are reading the emails.

So one of the ways that we try to deal with the
gaps is that we send out the emails with information.

1
2 It's time to register. It's holiday season. Here
3 are some food pantries that are open, whatever is
4 going on. And we try to push that out monthly. So
5 that they're connected somehow, even if they're not
6 responsive in the moment.

7 Um, so we try lots of different ways to connect
8 with our youth, our young people.

9 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Is there an advisory group
10 of young people that can help guide this work?

11 SHIRLEY DE PENA: There is. We, we have an FYCSI
12 student advisory group that tries- that, that helps
13 us and tells us- because I always say to them, I'm,
14 I'm not a foster youth, I never was a foster youth,
15 And so I, I know things, but there are things I don't
16 know. And so I always am trying to reach out to my
17 students to have them tell me, what do you need and
18 what, what can I do to best support you? Even if I
19 can't always make it happen, I at least know and can
20 think of ways to put it into the work at some point.

21 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Because they can be that
ambassador for you, pull, pull the students in that
are falling through the gap or - young people listen
to each other.

1
2 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Yes, they do. They don't
listen to us.

3 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: And the app, you should
4 create— you should get one of the young people who
5 are computer science majors in the system to create
6 that amazing app. And I see heads are shaking, so
7 I'm— that means there's some of them you can hire
right here.

8 SHIRLEY DE PENA: You have to have a conversation
9 with our IT. But yes, I think apps, different we

10 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Newsletters—

11 SHIRLEY DE PENA: We have to figure— we have to
figure out and I just wonder, as we're talking,
12 because like I said, we have a Youth Leadership
13 Council which is made up of young people that are in
14 care or recently left care, maybe they on a quarterly
15 or regular basis meet with your youth advocacy group,
because I think what I'm hearing is, and what we try
16 and, you know, for children that are in care, in
17 current 24-hour care, we're hoping that they're
18 getting the information about College Choice.

19 I think maybe when they've left care, but they
20 still needed the additional supports, and a lot of
times they're still connected to Grand Slam and the
21

1
2 various programs at, um, the, how do we make sure
3 they have the information? Because they're eligible
4 for the CFSY, right? They might not be eligible for
5 College Choice, but they're still eligible for some
6 of these other supports. And how do we make sure,
7 um, that information is shared? Like, you know, we
8 want to still provide support, and many of those
9 young people should have a coach, or they have access
10 to a coach, and the coach could share that
11 information. And we'll just make sure we improve the
12 communication. That's all we can do to make sure the
13 message gets out.

14 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Thank you. Council Member
15 Felder, 5 minutes, and your time starts now.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER FELDER: I, I don't have a
17 question. I just, first of all, thank you for
18 sharing your experience. And I, I, you know, I got
19 my, uh, MBA in management at CUNY but I would say
20 that prior to, prior to that, my, uh, um, I think my
21 principal, both, both, uh, my, uh, you know, yeshiva,
I would say in the Hebrew, uh, principal and secular
studies principal will attest that I was in their
office more than in the classroom by far.

1
2 So I, you know, I'm, I'm just, uh, listening and,
3 um, and, and not suggesting where you are. I'm just,
4 I'm just delighted, you know, uh, and it's really
5 very encouraging to other, other students, you know,
6 once when you hear— when you share your experiences
7 that, uh, other students that, uh, probably don't
8 feel they have any chance of succeeding, uh, and
9 then— and that you're not, uh, a Netflix figure that
10 was created by, uh, Walt Disney.

11 Yeah, it's, it's really true. So I, I, uh, just
12 wanted to thank you, and, and, um, I, I think, uh,
13 it's, it's just amazing that the, the fact that the
14 program has been growing the way it has is a, is a,
15 is proof that they— that you're doing something
16 right. There is no better proof because numbers, uh,
17 my, my background was accounting. I'm a CPA but,
18 but, but numbers, you can fix them any way you want.
19 But, but this is proof. There's nothing to talk
20 about.

21 So, I, you know, I, I wish you continued success,
and we look forward to, uh, you know, you coming back
repeatedly and doubling and, uh, you know, doubling
and tripling it. And then the— I'm happy I'm not the
Chair of any of the Committees because the two Chairs

1
2 have to- will have to fight like hell to get you the
3 money you need. Uh, we, we, we, uh, and, uh, er,
4 we're very, very- really, I'm just telling you that,
5 that, that, er, anybody in this field is lucky to
6 have the Chairs that we have in this area.

7 Sometimes, I, I need not tell you, for political
8 reasons, somebody's the Chair of the Committee, uh,
9 that doesn't belong there. And that's why I'm not
10 there, by the way.

11 But, but we're very lucky, uh, because they will
12 fight like hell uh, because they believe not only
13 what you're saying, but, but they really, really
14 believe in, in their mission, in their hearts. So,
15 uh, uh, and they can't do anything for me, so my, my
16 compliments, you know, uh, are real as well.

17 So I just want to thank you again. That's it.

18 MCKEEMA WALLACE: Thank you.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER FELDER: You're welcome and you
20 owe me about 7 seconds.

21 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Thank you, Council Member.
Council Member Brewer.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you, Council Member
Felder. I could say how great he is on many levels,
but he is great.

1
2 Um, my question- I'm a foster care parent and
3 also asylum seeker, went to court, so I got everybody
4 in my house. Um, I have a question. Um, for the
5 young people who are away at college, particularly at
6 the SUNY campuses, I have a lot of friends who are
7 advisors, and they actually don't go home on
8 holidays. They often stay in the dorms. There are
9 those who are, I would say, Oneida or Hamilton
10 County, wherever.

11 So how do you handle something like that? I
12 mean, that's trying to find perhaps families who
13 would take them in on the holidays, or I don't know,
14 it is hard. I know how it goes.

15 INA MENDEZ: So we, depending on what- sometimes
16 students will stay, let's say, for winter break or
17 summer break. They continue to, um, receive the same
18 College Choice supports, will get coverage, you know,
19 in terms of their housing costs, their tuition.

20 We do have young people, um, that will connect
21 back to their foster care placement if there is a
school break, a winter break, a spring break, and
we'll make sure that they can come back to their
foster home where they where they were placed

1
2 previously so that they don't have to kind of not be
3 connected to someone during those times.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Because I just-- that does
5 happen quite a bit, not just for people in foster
6 care, others too, to be honest with you. But you can
7 cover those costs during the--

8 INA MENDEZ: Oh, absolutely, absolutely, yes,
9 yes.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Sometimes the campuses
11 have to make special arrangements for that.

12 INA MENDEZ: Right? Every campus is a little
13 different, and sometimes like during winter break
14 they may require that you take a class, and sometimes
15 kids are open to taking class during the winter break
16 so they can stay, and we'll cover those costs. Same
17 thing with summer break.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay, secondly, NYCHA,
19 we're supposed to-- there are a lot of young people in
20 foster care who live in NYCHA, so do you work with
21 NYCHA on trying to identify them, get support, etc.?

INA MENDEZ: So for the--

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I don't know how they're
identified. I don't know if, uh, you know, I don't

1
2 know how it works. I know they're there, but I don't
3 know if NYCHA keeps track.

4 INA MENDEZ: So one of— it's twofold. So we have
5 young people that may start College Choice, start
6 college while they're in care, they get their
7 apartment, they move to independence, they can
8 remain. So just because you've left 24-hour foster
9 care, you can still will stay in College Choice
10 Program. So you may be living in NYCHA, supportive
11 housing, variety types of housing placements, and
12 we'll continue to provide support.

13 You'll still receive the stipend, support with
14 your, your housing costs, and then your college
15 tuition. I think what you're talking about is maybe
16 young people who have already exited care. They have
17 the foster care, um, experience— history. They're
18 not beyond the age, and so we might need to think
19 about how to engage those young people back to, um,
20 the FYSE program.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Well, I mean, it, it
come— I'm also talking, uh, younger children, maybe
on the first front, um, because NYCHA does have so
many young people in foster care. So I think what
I'm saying is even before you get involved on the

1 college level, maybe I'm talking out of turn here,
2 I'm talking more generally, I think we should, uh, be
3 paying more attention to foster care youth at NYCHA
4 because I know they need perhaps even more support.
5 The family needs support, the young person needs
6 support, the school needs support, et cetera. But so
7 that may not be your responsibility, but I think
8 generally we have to think about that.

9 INA MENDEZ: So if they're in care, they're our
10 responsibility one way or another, um, you know, with
11 their age. So I think what we-- one of the things I
12 mentioned is with the Fair Futures coach, you're
13 getting a tutor at the age of 11.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Right.

15 INA MENDEZ: And you get a coach at 14.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I was there when the
17 program began.

18 INA MENDEZ: Right, so there's a reason.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: It's country.

20 INA MENDEZ: Right, so those are ways to engage,
21 um, that population, um, and make sure that they're
aware of the options.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I'm just saying we should
3 work with NYCHA. That's what I'm saying. I'm just--
4 so that's what I'm saying, as another entity.

5 INA MENDEZ: Yes, absolutely.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay, also there's a
7 group called Options. I don't know if you work with
8 Options. Options is out of Goddard Riverside, and
9 basically it's, it's a very expensive fabulous-- you
10 can go there and say, I am interested in engineering
11 and I need a full scholarship and they will tell you
12 immediately, plus they give you lots of support.

13 So I just-- it's another tool. Um, I think there
14 may be one other nonprofit that has options, but the
15 young people that I work with, I send them-- I say,
16 hello, go to Options, because it gives you that kind
17 of support. That it's a major, uh, database, very
18 expensive for them to provide. So I just offer it as
19 another place to go. Anybody's open to the whole
20 city, and it's all free.

21 Um, my final question is, what, uh, you finish
college, uh, then what? Is there support after that,
getting through either 2 years, 4 years, or whatever?
How-- is that something that it's also part of what
you're doing when you're looking for a job?

1
2 INA MENDEZ: So, we continue to support the young
3 person when they finish college. They can, they can
4 receive the stipend, the \$60-a-day stipend for
5 another 6 months, and in that time, we are continuing
6 to provide support to them um, and then they have
7 their Fair Future Coach. And depending on the
8 housing that they moved into, we're working very
9 closely with a program called Anthos Home, and
10 they're doing some housing navigation services, and
11 they provide a year of aftercare. So they provide
12 some additional support, um, to help preserve the
households so that, you know, if there's issues come
up, they'll help the young person navigate so that
they can maintain their housing.

13 So we have a few, um, levers that we use to make
14 sure that young people are supported, but the most
15 important is the Fair Futures coach.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I know, I know.
17 Congratulations, everybody.

18 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Thank you, Council Member
19 Brewer. Uh, quick question for students who may be
20 parents: is there support for young people in this,
21 in this system with child care?

1
2 INA MENDEZ: Yes, I'm thinking about a case, um,
3 particularly. So yes, we continue to work with, um,
4 young people that are students. So depending on the
5 university they attend, they may have some natural
6 supports. Um, sometimes the young people will remain
7 in their foster care placement, so we support the
8 foster parent, for example, making sure that there's
9 day care and there's, you know, there's babysitting
10 when needed while the young person goes to school.
11 That's where that stipend really becomes helpful
12 because it allows the young person to have a little
13 bit more financial freedom to provide support. So we
14 definitely try to work with this young person and
15 their child and make sure they're connected. And so
16 that may mean in some cases they stay local, but
17 there are universities that might also provide, um,
18 supports for parenting students.

15 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: What is the most common
16 major you've seen among young people in care?

17 INA MENDEZ: Nursing is a big one. Social work,
18 psychology is another big one. And I think computers
19 are on the rise. That's what we're seeing.

19 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Alright, we learned in the
20 Preliminary Budget Hearing that FY26 funding for
21

1
2 FYSCI was \$3.6 million and that the program is funded
3 entirely by New York State. How has New York State
4 funding increased over recent years as enrollments of
5 students with a background in foster care has
6 increased?

7 SHIRLEY DE PENA: It's in- it's increased. Um,
8 so the FYCSI budget, as you know, because it's a New
9 York State funded program and it's at SUNY, CUNY, and
10 the private colleges, we share the budget. So the
11 overall budget may be more, but CUNY's allocation was
12 \$3.6 million. And so over the years we've had
13 increases, um but our enrollment numbers have
14 increased significantly as well. So it's, it's hard
15 sometimes to keep pace with the budget and the
16 enrollment, but we, we try to make it work.

17 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: So the next question as a
18 follow-up: does CUNY believe current funding on the
19 New York state is sufficient to meet the needs? What
20 unmet needs currently exist? If you were to have
21 more money, what else can you do?

22 SHIRLEY DE PENA: We could always use more money,
23 right? Um, yeah, I mean, I think there's ways to
24 strengthen what we do right, we can, you know, our
25 stipend that we give has stayed consistent over time.

1 That absolutely can increase. And I think the ways
2 in which we support students with housing off campus
3 would be one way that we can also look to, to secure,
4 um, I mean, to use with additional secured funding.

5 Um, right now we, the cost of, um, we, we cover
6 on-campus housing only. Um, we don't cover students
7 who are living in, in off-campus housing or in their
8 own apartments.

9 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Hmm, interesting.

10 INA MENDEZ: However, if they're in the College
11 Choice program, we can provide, um-

12 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Off-campus.

13 INA MENDEZ: Uh, uh, we can cover the cost for
14 the off-campus housing.

15 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Okay, um, okay, okay. Does
16 CUNY plan to look for additional funding source for
17 FY- CSI?

18 SHIRLEY DE PENA: We're always, we're always
19 looking for, um, additional supports. And I, and I
20 would also say, you know, funding is always great, of
21 course, you know, but just also just additional
resources to support young people is, is ways that
we're looking to make sure that we can support our
students.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Um, there's a program that
3 caught my attention recently in the SUNY-- in the SUNY
4 system called SUNY Reconnect Foster. Is that-- does
5 that program exist in CUNY?

6 SHIRLEY DE PENA: We have a CUNY Reconnect
7 program. Um, I don't know that it's specifically--
8 it's not specifically designed for foster youth, it's
9 for students who've stopped out.

10 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Um, yeah, we're familiar
11 CUNY Reconnect, but this one is-- the one is CUNY, is
12 specifically for students in foster care. So maybe
13 you guys should look at that model and see how can
14 we, um, duplicate that model on the CUNY level.

15 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Yeah, it's a great idea. Yeah,
16 so the program is when they drop out of college to
17 get them back in school. Um, what does CUNY do to
18 reach out to students who have left CUNY before
19 graduating to try to enroll them? That's what this
20 CUNY Reconnect is for.

21 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Right.

22 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: So it's the same model as
23 the CUNY Reconnect. Well, how do we get young people
24 back into the system? Mhm. Um, so that's, that's,
25 that's it. Um, how does CUNY coordinate with ACS as

1
2 an agency as well as with providers that ACS
3 contracts with to provide services? Do you feel the
4 coordinations are adequate?

5 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Absolutely. I have a great
6 relationship. I, you know, Sonia and I are on speed
7 dial with each other. Um, we're constantly
8 coordinating and I'm always looking for resources.
9 So, um, McKeema mentioned At the Table and City
10 Living. Those are other, uh, city organizations that
11 we also regularly- Anthos is another one. We're
12 always looking for ways to connect our students
13 because we know that we can't, we can't do
14 everything. And so we look to make sure that
15 students have what they need, and some of these
16 programs can support them post-graduation the way we
17 cannot.

18 So we wanna make sure our students are connected
19 to all of these programs. So we have a really good
20 relationship with a lot of these external
21 organizations as well.

22 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Well, that's one of the
23 things, um, I think Chair Stevens and I can agree on.
24 Sometimes agencies don't talk to each other, but yet
25 they're doing the same work.

1 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Right.

2 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: So I think the work overlap,
3 and there should be relationships there.

4 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Absolutely.

5 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Go ahead.

6 SONIA GONZALEZ: I wanted to add that, um, at
7 ACS, we meet with providers on a monthly basis. So
8 we meet with our ed specialists, um, college
9 specialists, case planners at times join these
10 monthly meetings, um, and we invite- spicy- we invite
11 financial aid offices to provide workshops to- for
12 our providers, um, and other subject matter experts
13 to make sure that our providers are getting the
14 information they need so they could turn key that
15 information over to the students. Um, the meetings
16 are usually very well attended, um, and CUNY is
17 definitely, um, very well in the room.

18 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Um, does CUNY plan to do
19 outreach to more students with background in foster
20 care either while they're in high school or after
21 they come to CUNY? If so, how does that happen? Do
you do the outreach?

SHIRLEY DE PENA: We generally do that through
ACS or ACS, you know, the foster care agencies. So

1 we'll go through those programs. So I'll connect
2 with an agency and I'll come into their, you know, to
3 the foster care agency and do presentations. Or I
4 remember one time we did like a FAFSA workshop to try
5 to help students complete their FAFSA in the room,
6 like in the moment, and get help in that moment. So
7 we do that through the foster care agencies.

8 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: You said you had coaches and
9 social workers. What does their caseloads look like?
10 What are the numbers?

11 SHIRLEY DE PENA: So our social work interns
12 have- the caseload can range from 30 to 40. Now
13 that's, um, sounds like a very high number for, uh,
14 internships, and it usually is. But remember, our
15 students don't connect every week or every day. So
16 our social work interns are in twice a week, and they
17 have this caseload, this higher caseload, because
18 students don't connect every single day. They might
19 connect once a month, they might connect twice a
20 month, they might, when there's an issue, connect
21 every day. And then when there's a month that
there's no issue, there's- they may not connect at
all. So it depends on the number of interns. We've
also- we are also able to increase the number of

1
2 interns. So if I'm looking at our enrollment and I'm
3 looking at our interns, I'll say, oh, we have a lot
4 more students this year, we need a lot more interns.

5 So we've— we currently are hosting 10 social work
6 interns. We've hosted up to 12, and we can keep— we
7 can take in more interns if we start to see a trend
8 where— because we do also see a trend where FYCSI
9 students are connecting more to interns. So when
10 interns leave in May, the interns— the next group
11 comes in in September. And so sometimes we'll have
12 students saying, where's my intern? Where's my
13 intern? So students are connecting more. So we may
14 drop the caseload and get more interns.

15 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: And how can the City Council
16 help, um, in supporting students with a background in
17 foster care who are enrolled in CUNY?

18 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Do you want to take that first?

19 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Um, money. Well, we know
20 that, but what else?

21 SHIRLEY DE PENA: So I think, you know, we're
talking about apps, like, if you— real talk, like,
how can we make apps and, and different pieces of
materials that we can share? I think what I'm
hearing a little bit— I'm not saying that every child

1
2 in care- I know they're not getting all the
3 information, but there's a group of children that
4 have been adopted, have kin gap, that have been
5 reunified. They are eligible for the programs, but
6 they're no longer physically attached to a foster
7 care provider. So I just wrote myself a note. We
8 have 3 agencies that provide post-adoption kin gap
9 services. Remember, their case is closed, but
10 sometimes those families still have bumps in the
11 road, and those 3 agencies are working with those
12 families.

13 So I just wrote myself a note: we need to connect
14 you to those-

15 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Yes.

16 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Programs, right? Children are
17 reunified, they're back with mom and dad, they're
18 back with grandma, they're back with whoever.
19 They're not part of, uh-

20 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Someone like me.

21 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Right? So how do we get- how
do we share that information with all of those
parents? 1,700 children were reunified in Fiscal
Year '25 for ACS. Not all of them are college age,
but they're gonna go to high school, they might be

1 interested in college. So how do we make sure,
2 'cause those, some of those children will be eligible
3 for these services that CUNY offers or SUNY offers,
4 but how do we share that information? I don't know,
5 I don't have the answer today, but I think that it's
6 a good, so City Council, if you wanna brainstorm and
7 we figure out how we can make sure that those parents
8 are also aware, um, that their, their children may be
9 eligible for, uh, um, particular types of services.
10 So I think those are— and well, and let me take that
11 a step further because yes, we— ours— our eligibility
12 requirement for our students are students who were in
13 care at the age of 13.

14 So the wonderful thing about FYCSI is that, as
15 McKeema said, your age currently doesn't matter. You
16 can be 30, you can be 40, you can be 50 years old and
17 still be eligible for FYCSI, which is a wonderful
18 thing. And because they weren't in care, they have
19 not been in care since 14, 15, or 16, they also don't
20 have the same kinds of supports as a student, as a
21 young person who's leaving care, going right into
college.

So one of the ways that we could use support
funding and other— because I keep talking about

1
2 reason, because yes, money is, is great. Yes, give
3 us all the money, right? But there's also the
4 resources. And so I think about relationships, I
5 think about resources, one of our, uh, the biggest
6 needs for our students is housing.

7 So where ACS can help students with housing,
8 with, um, vouchers for Section 8, for NYCHA, and I
9 don't wanna speak too much. I, I think that's,
10 that's still the, the, what the, you know, there's
11 priority housing for foster youth. There is no
12 priority housing for former foster youth.

13 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Right. There's no prior-
14 there's no priority voucher for, for, for former
15 foster youth. So if a student is 30 years old, 45
16 years old, and is living in our dorm because they
17 don't have housing, when they graduate, they have to
18 move. I don't have priority housing for them.

19 So any, any advocacy, any support, any resources,
20 any connections that, that we could, that we could
21 have to, to support students that don't have those
same supports because they haven't been in care in 10
years, in 20 years, in 5 years, is another way that
we could use the support.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, I mean, I think also
3 too, even thinking about— that's our whole fight
4 around CityFHEPS of like people who need the support,
5 they would get it. And so like this would be a
6 holistic thing because instead of saying like, we're
7 gonna prioritize and then putting folks who need
8 services against each other, right? Because we have
9 homeless runaway youth, right. We have all these
10 different categories to give people housing. So I
11 think we all should be collectively working together
12 to support the CityFHEP, the CityFHEP voucher push
13 that we've been having at the City Council level.

14 And also pushing NYCHA to be able to get those
15 vacancies up and going.

16 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Absolutely.

17 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: And I know that we've been
18 talking about that a lot too. And I know that like
19 Gale was even pushing the conversation around NYCHA.

20 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Absolutely.

21 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Like, we have a housing
crisis, and so we need to all be working together.
So we hear you and we wanna work in partnership with
you.

SHIRLEY DE PENA: I would love it.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: And continue to do advocacy
3 around that because the need is real. And I think
4 even pointing out the need for, um, folks who are
5 aged out of foster care who needs housing, like,
6 those are all the folks who are in the DSS shelters.

7 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Absolutely.

8 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: And all those things that
9 we're always yelling about.

10 SHIRLEY DE PENA: Absolutely. The other thing I
11 would say around policies, I mean, you're the City
12 Council, so the other supportive is, you know, I was
13 having a conversation with an organization who does--
14 who, who has-- or who has sometimes had-- has vouchers.
15 Living in a dorm is not considered at-risk in terms
16 of housing, in terms of emergency vouchers. I would
17 beg to differ. You know, students, if they graduate,
18 it-- you know, I-- we all know that, you know, you can
19 get a job after graduation, but sometimes you have to
20 wait for your paycheck, you have to save up a little
21 money, you need first month's rent, deposit. That
funding is not there. If that's not considered
at-risk housing, I'm not sure what is, because once
you graduate, that you can't live in the dorm
anymore.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: We want to make sure that young people are also staying in stable homes. Sometimes when we give them the vouchers, the housings don't match-

SHIRLEY DE PENA: Um, where the young people are. They're unsafe. We saw NYCHA housing that was not safe, and they had to move the young person with their child. Child was born in care as well. So, um, just one last question, Chair Stevens. Mental health, we must talk about that.

SHIRLEY DE PENA: Absolutely.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Do you provide mental health support?

SHIRLEY DE PENA: So we, we provide, um, we don't provide it directly. We provide casework counseling, we provide casework management. That's what our social work interns do. So one of the things where we call our social work internship program for our FYSE students is individualized intensive case management. We meet you where you're at. And so if all you need is, I need help finding a job, then that's what we do. But if what you need is, I need help finding mental health therapy, then that's what we do.

1
2 If you just need somebody to to because you're
3 just having a really bad day and nobody- that's what
4 we do. So we don't provide it directly. We're not a
5 mental health organization. I am a social worker. I
6 work with a team of social work supervisors. We're
7 all licensed social workers. We supervise social
8 work interns. So the mental health is there, and we
9 bring it into the work in, in our way of being, um,
10 in terms of mental health. But if a student needs
11 mental health therapy treatment, then we will refer
12 them out, and we often do. And we can start with our
13 counseling centers at CUNY and then refer them out
14 for long-term counseling and psychiatric services if
15 they need it.

16 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: How long is the wait?

17 SHIRLEY DE PENA: For counseling centers? It
18 differs by campus. So we will use counseling
19 centers, or we will go outside of CUNY, whatever's
20 first. There's also some organizations that
21 specifically do mental health treatment for foster
youth. There's an organization that I just got
connected to that I'm in the midst of connecting to
that does, um, therapy through the arts, creative

1 arts, for former foster youth, for current and former
2 youth.

3 So I'm always out looking for friends. It's all
4 what I was-- I always-- I can always use a friend. Um,
5 and so I look and see.

6 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Chair Stevens?

7 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Sure. Oh, look, my
8 earpiece is coming off. Alright. Um, I just have a
9 couple more questions. Um, what percentage of foster
10 youth in Fair Futures attend CUNY institutions? And
11 what are the high, um, high school graduation and
12 college enrollment and college persistence rates for
13 youth participating in Fair Futures.

14 INA MENDEZ: Currently, of the youth that are in
15 College Choice, 301, which I think is 63%, um, attend
16 CUNY of the 471, and the majority of those children--
17 I think I have the data point, do we have the data
18 point? Um, uh, received Fair Futures, sorry.

19 So of the children that go to CUNY, 224-- so 301
20 are in College Choice, 224-- thank you, Stephanie-- um,
21 are connected to Fair Futures.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: What specific supports do
Fair Futures coaches provide to youth who are
interested in enrolling in college, including

1 assistance with college application, financial aid,
2 college, um, selection, and transition planning?

3 INA MENDEZ: So the Fair Futures coaches will
4 provide a lot of support. We work very closely with
5 the Center for Fair Futures, and they do a lot of
6 training and provide technical assistance on a
7 variety of areas that are inter- that a young person
8 in foster care, housing, education, workforce. And
9 so through their platform, they have, um, access to
10 tr- they, the coaches can use this virtual platform
11 and they get information around college, the
12 application project- process, um, college guides, so
13 on and so forth. And so they're able to use that
14 information while they're working with the young
15 person. But in addition to the coach, as Sonia
16 mentioned, the agencies have education specialists.
17 They can support young people through that process.
18 and also their case planner.

16 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Are, um, are Fair Futures
17 coaches or staff involved in supporting students once
18 they're enrolled in CUNY, and if so, how is that
19 support structured?

20 INA MENDEZ: Yes, so Fair Futures coaches
21 continue to work with young people, you know, whether

1 they're going to CUNY, SUNY, if they're not in- going
2 to college, um, and they provide coaching, and
3 they're really working on individual goals. It may
4 have to do with their academic goals, their work
5 goals, maybe there's a goal around mental health, a
6 goal around housing, and through this Fair Futures
7 model, they are, um, provided the support to help
8 reach those particular goals.

9 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: What is the current funding
10 structure for Fair Futures, including the balance
11 between city funding and private philanthropy?

12 INA MENDEZ: So Fair Futures started in 2019, and
13 that was a public-private partnership. At that time,
14 the city invested about \$10 million, and over each of
15 the last few years, the number has increased.

16 In Fiscal Year '23, that money was baselined at
17 \$30 million, so the city funds the program
18 completely. That's not to say that each agency may
19 have their own grants and other, um, foundation
20 support that supports their Fair Futures or their
21 foster care programming. But the city, um, increased
the funding and baselined it in 2023. And then in
this past fiscal year, um, we increased the funding
to about \$34 million and we're on track for next year

1
2 to be around \$42 million. And then the goal when
3 we're fully scaled will be, ah, around \$54 million.

4 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Are there established
5 protocols to share systems between— Fair Future
6 providers and College Choice staff to track
7 referrals, um, confirm enrollment, and monitor
8 students' progress?

9 INA MENDEZ: So that's a lot of what Sonia does,
10 and so I'll, I'll turn it over to her to provide a
11 response.

12 SONIA GONZALEZ: Yes, um, we are consistently,
13 um, sharing data with each other to ensure that the
14 students who— the youth who are, um, in Fair Futures
15 and have coaches, um, are connected to the College
16 Choice program. We meet monthly to talk through
17 technical assistance to ensure that, um, resources
18 are being connected back to our providers, um, and
19 our students.

20 INA MENDEZ: Can I just make a clarification
21 regarding the Fair Futures funding? I get my
calendar year and fiscal years a little messed up,
right? Okay, so for Fiscal Year '23, I was correct,
we did baseline the dollars at \$30 million. At the
start of Fiscal Year '25, which was actually the

1 summer of 2024, we were at \$34 million, in Fiscal
2 Year '26 is \$43 million, and this July, Fiscal Year
3 '27, we'll be on track to be at \$54 million.

4 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Okay. Both the Fair
5 Futures and College Choice programs are difficult,
6 uh, to identify within ACS budget since they do not
7 have their own budget code. Will you work with our,
8 um, finance staff to identify historical percentages
9 and present, um, present spending on those programs?
10 What are the, um, respective budgets for Fair Futures
11 and College Choice in FY 2026?

12 INA MENDEZ: So the respective budgets for Fiscal
13 Year '26 is \$43,664,269 for Fair Futures, and College
14 Choice is \$50,698,921. And yes-

15 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Those are really specific
16 numbers. Could you please email that?

17 INA MENDEZ: Yes.

18 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Thank you.

19 INA MENDEZ: So, uh, you didn't write that down?
20 No. Um, and yes, and yes, our finance team is willing
21 to, you know, work with whoever to create budget
codes.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Thank you.

1
2 INA MENDEZ: It won't be me, but the finance team
will do it.

3 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: It won't be me either. But
4 no, um, thank you so much. Those are all questions I
5 have.

6 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: I had a quick question. If
7 a student wanna pursue a graduate degree, uh, what
type of support is in place for them?

8 SHIRLEY DE PENA: So, sorry, so FYCSI does not
9 support beyond the bachelor's degree. So we connect
10 students as much as possible to whatever grants are
11 out there. Um, because we started under Opportunity
12 Programs, um, Opportunity Programs do have a GOP
13 program, a Graduate Opportunity Program. And so if we
14 happen to have a foster youth that is eligible for a
15 program such as that, we, you know, connect them to
16 that, or just any, any grants or, or resources that
17 are out there for them. But unfortunately, the
funding, current funding for FYCSI is only until the
bachelor's level.

18 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I lied, I'm back. Um, as
19 coordination between these programs has strengthened,
20 what gaps remain in delivering historic supports for
21 young people with foster care experience,

1 particularly during key transition points in college?

2 And, um, I guess this is talking about Fair Futures
3 and, um, college success programs and things like
4 that.

5 INA MENDEZ: In terms of gaps, I mean, I think we
6 identified some, making sure everyone in care is
7 aware of the program. Um, so we have to make sure
8 that the workforce, the case planners, and the
9 coaches know about the program and know how best to,
10 um, reach out to others for help. I think we can
11 also, you know, continue to strengthen our
12 coordination, making sure that all of the foster care
13 agencies are involved in, um, learning about the
14 programs and the supports at CUNY, um, and then also
15 College Choice. Sonia, do you have other gaps?

16 SONIA GONZALEZ: So one of the things we try to-
17 like, so we have data agreements, and so we- I think
18 what we- the next step -foster care data is very
19 protected.

20 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Mhm.

21 INA MENDEZ: Um, we do have a data sharing
agreement with, um, New York City Public Schools. I
don't believe we have a formal data sharing with
CUNY, and so we probably could follow up with our

1 business law team to see if that is something that we
2 can, um, maybe do a little bit more matching or even
3 maybe on an aggregate level.

4 So we have to— we don't wanna, you know, again,
5 the foster care data is very protected and we wanna
6 preserve that, but that might be something that we
7 can look to see because that might allow us to— for
8 example, if there was a kid in foster care, 24-hour
9 placement, but in, um, the CUNY program that not part
10 of College Choice, there are some other benefits we
11 could provide that, that young person. So data
12 sharing might help catch some of those gaps, but, um,
13 that would be something we'd have to explore.

14 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Well, one of the things
15 that I'm seeing here that some providers, um, the
16 questions even around, like, that obviously the
17 supports are meaningful, but the access to sometimes
18 has delays and sometimes it is really time-consuming.
19 Um, how could, how can we, how clearly do young
20 people understand the distinctions and purpose of
21 each program? So like even the, the amount
sometimes, and what changes would you recommend to
ensure that support reaches students more quickly at
a moment when it is most needed?

1
2 INA MENDEZ: One of the things, um, College
3 Choice, um, is able to support as many young people
4 because we really want to make sure that all of the
5 financial aid, all of the scholarships are applied
6 before we then, um, if we have to contribute.

7 So that does create sometimes— because the
8 bursar's office is like, you know, right, but they're
9 still waiting to hear from the Pell Grant and from
10 this grant and this grant. And sometimes even family
11 court will get involved, like ACS needs to but we
12 really have to kind of do this dance. And I know
13 that creates anxiety for kids in, in, in school,
14 right? Because you may be getting messages and
15 emails.

16 So that is something that we try to communicate
17 and provide support during that nuance. And then of
18 course, making sure that we're still able to— and New
19 York Foundling is, is our great partner in this work—
20 is as, you know, if there are challenges that come
21 up, whether it's school, whether, um, it's an
emotional or a social nature, making sure that we are
providing those wraparound services as quickly as
possible.

1
2 Sometimes because they're living in the dorm,
3 it's different than when you're in a foster care
4 placement that someone might be, you know, have eyes
5 on you every day. So we have to just, you know, make
6 sure that we are able to support young people and
7 they know where to turn if they have a crisis.

8 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I mean, even with that, um,
9 and again, like, they're saying, the provider is
10 saying that authorization and verification um, and
11 handoffs can, can determine impact. But from your
12 perspective, what are some common protocols and
13 Administration bottlenecks that slow down this
14 process and supports? And I think you said some of
15 it is like sometimes family court getting involved
16 and like it's, you know, it's all these different
17 things. Um, where, um, where are some places you
18 think that can be streamlined to kind of help support
19 that work, especially in these moments of crisis?
20 Because it sounds like sometimes, although with all
21 these supports and how it has all these good
intentions, there's still a lot of bottleneck. And
like, we know that navigating college in general is
crazy because I just remember just always being like,

1 oh, okay, I have another email. Oh, I'm getting
2 kicked out.

3 Like, it— like, and that's— it's a lot.

4 INA MENDEZ: Imagine going to school when there
5 was an email. But yes, I understand.

6 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Oh, we had email. I'm not
7 that old. Dang. So what did they do, send a letter?
8 Like how did that work?

9 INA MENDEZ: Oh, so sad. I don't even remember,
10 but we didn't have emails or that much.

11 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: How did they get that
12 information? A letter sounds crazy. I know, it's so
13 crazy. A letter is like— it's 7 days later now. I'm
14 like, what's happening?

15 I'm sorry, young people, they're looking at us
16 like, what do you mean?

17 INA MENDEZ: I know, sometimes I wish the
18 documentation wasn't needed. You're in care, you're
19 in school, you're accepted. I think that the
20 documentation piece for our young, our young, uh,
21 folks, it's— it is grueling at times because they do
have to navigate going into their Bursar office and
going to get their enrollment verification, and
timelines sometimes don't match up. But I think, um,

1
2 because we at ACS are overseeing the application
3 process and through that RFP process-- that's a new
4 implementation this year-- we're able to really work
5 quicker with our providers and directly with the
6 students when issues come up. We don't have
7 contracts with the university offices to get that
8 information on the back end, which is kind of like on
9 my wish list.

10 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Um, and so everybody can
11 hear.

12 INA MENDEZ: The wish list of the back end
13 partnership. Just send it to us.

14 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Alright, great. Um,
15 putting it out in the universe.

16 INA MENDEZ: But what we have done is develop
17 partnerships with those respective offices at
18 various, um, universities.

19 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: So if it made more sense
20 for us to just do it on the back channel, why hasn't
21 that been something that's been pursued? It's, um,
it's the same thing, you know, mentioned in terms of
the confidentiality. It's that when our youth are in
school, they are considered independent adults, and
the communication, you know, has to come from the

1 student. Um, there are FERPA's and HIPAA's that
2 sometimes can help with that, but even dependent on
3 the university, if that is in place, they still may
4 say back off, we need to speak to the student, the
5 student needs to lead this charge.

6 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I mean, I get that students
7 should lead the charge and we want them to be
8 responsible, but like, some of it sounds like it's
9 administrative stuff that like we should really just
10 be talking about being like, here's the paperwork.
11 They've been in care. This makes more sense. So,
12 um, hopefully we can like figure that out. Cause
13 that, that sounds--

14 INA MENDEZ: And then just to piggyback on what
15 Sonia said, the documentation is essential because we
16 use that information for our claiming purposes. Like
17 we have to verify that they're in care and that
18 allows us to then draw down JP funds and what other
19 state dollars so that we can really continue to
20 expand the program.

21 So, we can look at how best to streamline. Um,
we've done that a little bit in some of the other,
um, pieces of our work not related to College Choice,
but just in general to make life a little easier for

1 foster care providers so they don't have to send so
2 many documents to us. So we can look at the process
3 and see what we— where we might be able to give some
4 easement.

5 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yeah, well, those are all
6 the questions I have for now. Thank you.

7 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Does, um, College Choice
8 have slots or it's, it's on a rolling basis.

9 So this year our budget afforded 430, um, young
10 people. So I mean, beginning of Fiscal Year '26 was
11 July 1st of 2025. But as I mentioned, because not
12 every student takes the same amount of money, we were
13 able to serve 471 youth and stay within our budget.
14 So, um, some of those documents and those different
15 things allow us to have a little bit more flexibility
16 because in our able to apply for more scholarships,
17 more financial aid. So your balance may be zero,
18 your balance may be, you know, \$1,000, and we're able
19 to just serve— well, maybe yours is zero too, but
20 that just allows us so that when we have, um, you
21 know, students in universities where there is a
balance, we can support them too. It's really
important. College Choice allows young people to
have a choice. And just like, um, you know, young

1 people, some people want to go to this particular
2 school, some people want to be someplace warm, some
3 people are interested in anthropology. And so
4 College Choice does let young people kind of go where
5 they feel like they'll excel, um, the most. And so
6 we want to keep that flexibility as much as possible.

7 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: So there is never a waitlist
8 for students to get into the program?

9 INA MENDEZ: So no, for— and for FYCSI, we accept
10 students on a rolling basis. So the app— we get most
11 of our students at the beginning of the year,
12 obviously, but then every month OCFS is verifying
13 eligible students because students can continue to
14 apply throughout the year. So, all the way up to,
15 like, March, April, we're getting lists from students
16 that are applying to the program and we bring them
17 right in. Once they are found eligible by OCFS,
18 they're in.

19 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Okay, thank you. Thank you.
20 Yeah, we're done for real. Thank you.

21 INA MENDEZ: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Thank you for sharing. Yes.
Yeah, they should. Okay. Yeah, all the way around

1 the world. Yeah, ACS. Uh-huh, ACS. She is. Yes.
2 Oh, that's right. Thank you, thank you.

3 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Guys, just a friendly
4 reminder, if you wish to testify, you must fill out
5 an appearance card with me in the back. So if you
6 would like to speak, you need that appearance card.
Thank you.

7 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Okay, I now open, open the
8 hearing for public testimony. I remind members of
9 the public that this is a formal government,
10 proceeding and that decorum should be observed at all
11 times. As such, members of the public shall remain
12 silent at all times. The witness table is reserved
13 for people who wish to testify. No video recording
or photography is allowed from the witness table.

14 Further, members of the public may not present
15 audio or video recording as testimony, but may submit
16 transcripts of such recording to the Sergeant of Arms
17 for inclusion in the hearing record. If you wish to
18 speak today's- in today- at today's hearing, please
19 fill out an appearance card at the Sergeant- with the
Sergeant at Arms if you have not already done so and
20 wait to be recognized.
21

1
2 When recognized, you'll have 2 minutes to speak
3 on today's hearing topic, strengthening CUNY pathways
4 for current and former foster youth. If you have a
5 written statement or additional written testimony you
6 wish to submit for the record, please provide a copy
7 of that testimony to the Sergeant at Arms. I will
8 now call the first panel. Alyssa Roos(SP?), if I'm—
9 forgive me for the last name, Ethan Colon, Ethan,
10 Najmah Nicole Abraham. If I mispronounce your name,
11 please forgive me and Jaylen Casaro. Am I saying
12 that right? Jaylen. I'm trying to read it. Is
13 there a Jaylen Castro here and Adam Reyes? Adam?
14 This person is not— this person is not here. Okay,
15 thank you.

16 You wanna give me one more person? Okay, sure.
17 Oh, they have— I think we should get started. Okay,
18 you may start.

19 ALYSSA ROOS: Okay, um, good afternoon, Chair
20 Stevens and Joseph. Thank you for being here today.
21 My name is Alyssa. I am a former foster youth who
aged out of care. I am now studying for my biology
degree at Borough of Manhattan Community College, and
I am here today for the Foster Youth College Success
Initiative, also known as FYSE. Um, while in foster

1
2 care, I was enrolled in college. However, I did not
3 have the support needed to succeed, which led me to
4 withdraw from multiple semesters.

5 At the time, I wasn't aware I was eligible for
6 programs such as College Choice or FYSE, so I never
7 enrolled in them while in care. Without that
8 support, college felt overwhelming. I struggled
9 financially and emotionally, which hurt my ability to
10 focus on classes. I wasn't having difficulty due to
11 not prioritizing my education, but because I was not
12 getting college without the built-in support systems
13 that many students have.

14 After enrolling in FYSE last year, everything
15 changed for me. For the first time, I had a support
16 system that did not just disappear because I reached
17 a certain age. I had access to people who believed
18 in my ability to succeed and received financial
19 assistance to pay for leftover expenses. Without
20 that support, I can guarantee right now I would not
21 be enrolled in college. And these programs give
foster youth like myself the ability to remain
enrolled in school.

However, there is still work to be done. I do
not believe we will reach the majority of foster

1 youth by having posts on ACS social media and events.
2 Um, we must ensure foster youth are informed earlier
3 by making signage of programs like FYSE visible in
4 places where they spend the most time, such as group
5 homes and foster homes.

6 I can sit here today as I was given a second
7 chance to pursue my education, yet many other youth
8 cannot say the same. With increased awareness of
9 programs such as College Choice and FYSE, more young
10 people can have the opportunity to pursue education
11 before they are deemed ineligible. Because when we
12 age out of foster care, we do not age out of needing
13 a support system. Thank you for your time.

14 ETHAN COLON: Good afternoon, everyone. My name
15 is Ethan Colon. I'm from the Bronx, and I want to
16 share how Youth Ath- Youth Action Youth Build program
17 has impacted my life and our community. Youth Build
18 programs like this one give young adults a real
19 second chance, and we are asking for \$2.1 million in
20 city funding to support Youth Build programs
21 citywide.

I first heard about Youth Build from my mother
after she saw a flyer in our building. I decided to
give it a chance, and that decision changed

1
2 everything. At Youth Build, I found a community of
3 peers and instructors who truly cared about my
4 success and that, and supported, and that support
5 made a real difference me. Through job fairs and
6 college visits, Youth Build connected me with real
opportunities.

7 So far, I've passed one GED exam and earned
8 certifications in OSHA, NCCR, HVAC, and plumbing. At
9 one point, I felt like I was running out of chances,
10 but Youth Build gave me another opportunity, and I'm
11 so grateful for the doors that it's opened for me. I
12 know there are many- I know there are many more
13 students like me who would benefit from this program.
14 As a young man who has benefited from being able to
15 access a Youth Build program. I would like the same
16 opportunity for other young people like me, and
17 that's why I urge the City Council to provide- urge
18 the Council to provide the needed funding to support
19 Youth Action Build NYC. Thank you.
20
21

UNIDENTIFIED: Good job.

1
2 NAJMAH NICOLE ABRAHAM: Thank you. Alright, um,
3 good morning. My name is Najmah Nicole Abraham, and
4 I am the case manager and transitional coach for
5 Youth Build North Brooklyn. I am also a proud New
6 Yorker, born and raised, and I am a former foster
7 care— um, in the foster care system myself and a
8 graduate of CUNY as well.

9 So I'm here to represent that. Um, I'm here on
10 behalf of NYC Youth Build Collaborative to advocate
11 for the restoration and baselining of \$2.1 million
12 for the 2027 budget. This funding is essential in
13 continuing to strengthen the services for hundreds of
14 young people across New York New York City.

15 At Youth Build, we serve young people between the
16 ages of 16 and 24 who are often labeled out of school
17 or out of work. But in my role, I see beyond those
18 labels every day. I see resili— resilience. I see
19 potential. I see young people who, with the right
20 support, are ready to build meaningful futures.

21 Youth Build provides hands-on training in
high-demand industries such as construction, health
care, information technology, and hospitality.
Creating real pathways to stable, well-paying
careers. But what makes this program truly impactful

1
2 is this holistic approach. Our participants receive
3 education, leadership development, mental health
4 support, and wraparound services that help them
5 navigate real-life challenges.

6 I work closely with young people as they
7 transition into workforce, higher education, and
8 independent living. I've seen firsthand how this
9 program transforms lives, not just by helping
10 participants gain employment, but, but by helping
11 them build confidence, purpose, and stability.

12 Another powerful aspect of Youth Build is community
13 impact. Participants contribute to the construction
14 and rehabilitation of affordable housing, directly
15 supporting low-income and homeless families in their
16 own neighborhoods.

17 They are not just preparing for the future, they
18 are actively shaping their communities today. The
19 NYC Youth Build Collaborative spans all 5 boroughs,
20 including organizations like New Settlement Youth
21 Build, Cypress Hills Development Corporation, St.
Nick's North Brooklyn, Northern Manhattan Improvement
Corporation Youth Build, Queens Community House,
NYCID Youth Build Impact.

1
2 Restoring this funding, not just maintaining this
3 program, but it's investing in our young people,
4 strengthening communities, and building a more
5 equitable New York City. So thank you very much for
6 listening.

7 ADAM REYES: Hello, uh, my name is Adam Reyes,
8 and today I wanna talk about what being part of
9 Dreams Build- Youth Build means to me. Um, I was- I
10 heard of this program when I was, um, working in that
11 area of my community, and it struck me because they
12 had construction and culinary, and I was lucky to do
13 both.

14 Um, I done culinary for some time, but then I
15 moved on to construction because I felt like it was
16 better for me. Um, I tried my hardest to get all my
17 certifications like OSHA and NCCR, working on my
18 goals of finishing 2 more, and then I'm, um, finished
19 with both of those. But it has helped me a lot and
20 has helped so many others because it has showed us
21 that one, people really do care and people do want to
to help our community expand and help others learn on
more of what people could accomplish in life because
a lot of people my age don't really have a set goal
on where they want to go in life. So I feel like

1 YouthBuild or in general of Youth Build, um, it helps
2 show them the direction.

3 So, uh, that's why we're asking for money so we
4 can help, uh, sorry, I'm nervous, so we, so we can
5 help others, um, not just me, like fellow classmates
6 and fellow people around the world. Thank you.

7 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Thank you so much. Um,
8 one, I wanna say thank you for showing up again. Um,
9 so happy to be here. Um, this was one of the young
10 people with our, our, um, foster care shadow day who
11 was very adamant about, um, how do we get this
12 information out. He gave a suggestion around putting
13 up posters and flyers in these places. I'm sure they
14 have so much more to offer.

15 Um, but also I, I want to make sure we remind- I
16 know Youth Build is here and the coalition had a
17 hearing today, but we want to make sure we're staying
18 on topic of, um, of what the topic is today. What is
19 it?

20 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Strengthening CUNY pathways
21 for current and former foster youth.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: And so we want to make sure
we stay on topic. And so, um, I know what Youth
Build requesting their money. We do have a budget,

1 executive budget hearing come up. And so I wanna
2 make sure that you guys come to that as well. So
3 thank you.

4 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Um, as, as Alyssa mentioned
5 earlier, not all foster youth are living. So there's
6 group homes as well that sometimes we discount and we
7 forget. So group homes, and what was the other
8 location you wanted us to have?

9 ADAM REYES: Uh, foster homes, but realistically
10 it should be any, like, facility contracted under ACS
11 or OCFS, I believe.

12 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Okay.

13 ADAM REYES: In my opinion— and your opinion is
14 good because you, you've lived the experience. So
15 thank you for that, Alyssa.

16 And we see them sometime— when do we see our
17 foster youth again?

18 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Actually be here May 20th.

19 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Yeah, May 20th we see our
20 young people again. So thank you for being here.

21 ADAM REYES: Of course.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Yeah, yeah. So thank you
all.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: And we should see you in the executive budget. That's where you make your financial ask.

NAJMAH NICOLE ABRAHAM: Okay.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Okay.

NAJMAH NICOLE ABRAHAM: Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: You're very welcome. Daniel Reden, um, Mamoudou Diomande, Josiah Rumesar, Fatima Kamil, and Akkeem Polack. Mhm. Akkeem, we called you Akkeem. Thank you.

AKKEEM POLACK: Work never stops. Never. Thank you. Daniel Redden, is there a Daniel? That's okay. Akkeem, I see you, Mamoudou. Okay, I think I have this one already. I have, um, I have this, I have this one already. Alright, you may start. He's the boss. Okay, boss.

AKKEEM POLACK: Good afternoon, um, uh, Members of the Higher Education and Work for- and Children and Youth Committees. Um, my name is Akeem Polack, Chairperson of the CUNY University Student Senate and CUNY trustee representing more than 240,000 students across 26 campuses. The University Student Senate is the official representative body of CUNY students and exists to elevate student voices directly to

1
2 policymakers. That responsibility includes
3 advocating for students who are too often overlooked,
4 including current and former foster youth across the
5 system.

6 Students with foster care backgrounds are part of
7 the broader CUNY student body, yet many enter college
8 without the family, financial support, housing
9 stability, or emergency safety nets that other
10 students may rely on. They are often expected to
11 navigate higher education while also managing basic
12 survival needs. From a student government
13 perspective, this is not about special treatment. It
14 is about equitable access to the same opportunity
15 every student deserves.

16 We know students do better when they have
17 consistent and high-touch support system. Across
18 CUNY, programs such as SEEK, ASAP, and ACE have
19 demonstrated that students succeed when they are
20 connected to advising, mentorship, and people who
21 understand their circumstances.

For example, for students who have already
experienced instability, um, or trusted relationships
or consistent support, they can be just as important
and they will also receive financial assistance.

1 Just as important as financial assistance, these
2 things are important. Housing stability must also be
3 recognized as a student success issue.

4 USS has consistently highlighted housing
5 insecurity and unmet basic needs as barriers to
6 student retention and graduation. For current and
7 former foster youth, year-round housing can often
8 mean the difference between persistence and dropping
9 out. Transportation affordability is another major
10 barrier. Without family or financial support, many
11 students risk missing classes, advising, and
12 essential services if they cannot afford transit.

13 As we discuss pathways for foster youth, access
14 must come first. We have our pilot program that
15 we've been advocating for, for a while, and
16 interestingly enough, we do have an allocate— an
17 allocation, I think, around 5 to 10% for foster
18 youth. This need for coordinated support has also
19 been recognized beyond CUNY.

20 In the 2022 Center for an Urban Future report,
21 City of Aspiration: 150 Ideas for Building a More
Equitable New York City, leaders highlighted the
importance of creating private sector internships for
transition-age youth, noting that young adults

1 currently or formerly in foster care inappropriate—
2 inappropriate, you know, I don't know that word, um,
3 high employment and housing stability. That
4 recommendation reinforces a broader truth: when
5 students and systems invest in stability, access, and
6 targeted support, outcomes improve.

7 The USS urges the Council to continue
8 prioritizing current and former foster youth in
9 higher education and to continue supporting stronger
10 coordination between CUNY, ACS, and housing systems
11 to elevate foster youth needs within broader student
12 basic needs discussions and to recognize programs
13 like FYCSI as models that work when institutions
14 collaborate. Thank you.

15 I'm so sorry about not saying that word.

16 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: You're fine.

17 AKKEEM POLACK: Yeah.

18 DANIEL REDEN: Good afternoon. Excuse me. Okay,
19 yeah, good afternoon, Chairs and, uh, the Committee
20 on Higher Education and Children and Youth. Uh, my
21 name is Daniel Reden. I am a, uh, the former
Chairperson, the predecessor of Akkeem, of the
University Student Senate and trustee emeritus of
CUNY University of New York.

1
2 Currently I work on the CUNY Beyond initiative in
3 the CUNY Central Office, but before any of that, I
4 was a foster kid born to Nigerian immigrants in Van
5 Dyke Public housing in NYCHA. And there's a pre-FYC,
6 uh, CSI, and there's a post-FYC. That's how
7 important and that's how much this program meant to
8 me— it means to me.

9 When I first got to CUNY, I was, uh, in an online
10 institution, CUNY SPS, and I received an email about
11 the program and the offerings and how it can help
12 students like me who are independent. Who don't have
13 a social important at, just getting out the mud. And
14 what Shirley de Pena and her team did for me is
15 something that's invaluable, that goes beyond mere
16 dollars or financial. It's, it's a pathway, a crack
17 in the door for a student like me to rise and be the
18 student trustee representative for 250,000 students
19 and to work currently, uh, on the Youth Advisory
20 Board of the Office of Children and Family Services
21 to give back. But if it wasn't for her program, the
financial support, the mental and financial slack
that, that woman gave me. And when I sat in her
office and met with her, she spoke to me not as a
foster kid or someone whose past is a problem that

1
2 needs to be solved, but some— a human being. And she
3 asked me, she said, what can I do to help you? How's
4 your living situation? No, you know, I'm living in
5 squalor, you know what I'm saying?

6 I said, uh, could be better. And she said,
7 Daniel, Here's a list of schools that, you know, have
8 campuses and with, with dormitories at CUNY. Choose
9 one. We'll help you. That changed the trajectory of
10 my life. Your environment means so much to how you—
11 what you come home to.

12 Right now I come home to people jogging and
13 walking dogs, and Brownsville is a much different
14 reality, some people would know. And so as someone
15 who's a former foster kid who's come to CUNY with
16 nothing and who is in CUNY now and stand with— sit
17 before you as someone who's working at the central
18 office on what I believe is the most important
19 initiative in the city. Someone who's a trustee
20 formerly, and, you know, I mean, was in King's
21 position before he's doing it so well. Um and
someone who's giving back and reaching back into that
bucket, uh, and in terms of the, the, you know, the,
uh, advocacy for kids who are in foster care.

1
2 None of that would be possible without her
3 program. So beyond the numbers, beyond the data
4 points, beyond the, you know, the money, it's a
5 story, it's a life, it's— and I just wanted to say
6 that. So thank you.

7 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Thank you for sharing that,
8 and that's why you're here. You continue to do that
9 advocacy, use your voice to say, here, here are the
10 gaps that I experience, how can we make this better?
11 And, and lead this work with a lot of love and
12 compassion.

13 Chair Stevens and I, we come with this work with
14 a lot of love, experience. I was a foster mom, I
15 adopted my two boys. So this work is— comes with a
16 lot of love and passion and empathy as well. So
17 thank you for always lifting your voice. This was a
18 teary day today. Yeah, good job. In a good way, in
19 a good way.

20 DANIEL REDEN: in a real way.

21 FATIMA-ZAHARA KAMIL: Good, good afternoon, Chair
and Members of the Committee on Higher Education,
Children and Youth.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Louder.

1
2 FATIMA-ZAHARA KAMIL: Okay. Ah, okay. Good
3 afternoon, Chair and Members of the Committee on
4 Higher Education, Children and Youth. Um, my name is
5 Fatima Zahara-Kamil and I serve as the Vice Chair for
6 International Student Affairs in the CUNY University
7 Student Senate, representing international immigrant
8 and undocumented students across our campuses.

9 As an international student myself, I understand
10 what it means to navigate higher education while
11 balancing financial pressure, uncertainty, and
12 limited access to opportunities. Many of the
13 students I represent face even greater barriers, not
14 because they lack potential, but because systems were
15 not designed with them in mind.

16 While today's hearing focuses on foster youth, I
17 want to highlight that many of these challenges,
18 including financial instability, housing insecurity,
19 and lack of consistent support, are also deeply
20 shared by immigrant and undocumented students.
21 Students face limited access to financial aid,
barriers to internships and career pathways, and
mental health challenges tied to uncertainty. Yet
despite all of this, they continue to show up,

1
2 succeed academically, and lead within our
3 communities.

4 CUNY has opened doors for so many of us, but to
5 truly fulfill its mission, we must ensure those,
6 those doors remain open, accessible to all students.
7 I respectfully urge the Council to expand financial
8 and emergency support, create more inclusive career
9 pathways, and strengthen campus support systems that
10 are culturally responsive and accessible regardless
11 of status.

12 I have seen firsthand how simple feeling seen and
13 supported can transform a student's journey.
14 Investing in these students is not just about equity,
15 it is about investing in the future of New York City.
16 Thank you.

17 JOSIAH RUMESAR: Yes, uh, good afternoon, Chair
18 Joseph and Chair Steven and the Council as well. My
19 name is Josiah Rumesar and I'm an outgoing student at
20 the CUNY School of Law. I'm also the Vice Chair for
21 Graduate Affairs at the CUNY University Student
Senate, where I have the pleasure to work alongside
my colleagues here.

In my internship with the Legal Aid Society
Juvenile Rights Practice, I worked directly with

1 youth who were impacted by the foster care system. I
2 got to interview youth and speak with youth who told
3 me their experiences in the foster care system, and
4 what I see from them all is that they're all bright
5 individuals who have a strong future ahead. What the
6 youth need, though, is more investment into these
7 programs that are getting them further, and these
8 foster care youth need more support after they
graduate and age out of the system as well.

9 The housing support for youth aging out of the
10 foster care system is also essential as well. We
11 don't need any more youth aging out of the foster
12 care system and going into homelessness. I recall a
13 shocking stat last year that over 150K children in
14 New York City experienced homelessness or
15 houselessness. Education is a driving force that can
16 change someone's life. Investing more into housing
17 programs or other support essential programs for
foster care youth going forward, and that is
necessary.

18 Investing in CUNY students who went through the
19 foster care system and will also level out the gap
20 that exists as well. These days, more than
21 associate's or bachelor's degree is needed, um, in

1
2 this economy, and we need to support our foster care
3 youth in their graduate studies as well, I will say.
4 Um, thank you so much for your time, and yeah,
5 thanks.

6 MAMOUDOU DIOMANDE: Good afternoon, Chair Joseph,
7 Chair Stevens, and honorable Members of the
8 Committees on Higher Education and Children and
9 Youth. Thank you for the opportunity to testify
10 today on the importance of strengthening pathways for
11 current and former foster youth across the City
12 University of New York.

13 My testimony focuses on the progress that has
14 been made through existing programs and the
15 persisting gaps that remain and the urgent need for
16 stronger coordination, expanded eligibility, and
17 sustained investment to ensure foster youth cannot
18 only enroll into CUNY but graduate and thrive. So we
19 already heard all of the metrics and all of the
20 numbers from ACS. We heard the numbers from CUNY.
21 And I'm just gonna give the recommended actions
because we don't wanna, you know, waste any more
time.

Uh, despite these efforts, significant challenges
still remain. Coordination between CUNY and ACS is

1 often uneven, like the Chair, um, mentioned earlier.
2 Data sharing is limited, and students frequently
3 experience confusion about which supports they
4 qualify for and when those supports end.

5 Um, number 1, expand FYCSI eligibility, including
6 eliminating the age 13 foster care requirement and
7 allowing continued support through to degree
8 completion to ensure that no student is left behind.

9 Strengthen— number 2, strengthen coordination and
10 data sharing between CUNY and ACS to ensure seamless
11 proactive and support as students transition into and
12 through college. Number 3, ensure year-round housing
13 stability. Number 4, support dedicated foster youth
14 liaisons on every CUNY campus with clear
15 accountability and consistent long-term funding.

16 Uh, use outcome metrics that reflect student
17 success holistically, including retention,
18 graduation, housing stability, 'cause these are all
19 factors that, um, will encourage or discourage,
20 especially somebody who's been in foster care.

21 Um, so my conclusion is foster youth are not
asking for special treatment you know. This is a
prime example. They are asking for a fair chance.
When given stable support systems, clear pathways,

1
2 and institutional commitment, foster youth can
3 succeed. The cost of inaction is not measured in
4 dollars but in the lost potential of brilliant young
5 people. With the right support, will be our city's
6 future leaders and innovators.

7 I urge you to treat this not merely as an
8 oversight item, but as a commitment to share
9 accountability. We have the roadmap. Now we need
10 the political will to finalize the destination.
11 Thank you.

12 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: I think all of that is here.
13 The commitment is already here. The two Chairs
14 committed to the hip with this work. Transparency,
15 oversight, that's never a question for us.

16 MAMOUDOU DIOMANDE: Yes, ma'am.

17 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: It's how do we work together
18 to make sure we're filling in the gaps. That's
19 always been the work for Chair Stevens and I. Um,
20 that's why we always want to sit and have round
21 tables, um, and meet and talk about the gaps that you
mentioned. Make sure you email those recommendations
to us. Those are good working points that we can
start. And there's also confidentiality. There's
laws around those things. How do we navigate around

1 those spaces? And I think the Deputy Commissioner
2 mentioned that.

3 Now they gotta go back and look- talk to their
4 legal team and be like, okay, how do we share data?
5 So all of that work comes into play, but being here
6 today to testify so we can see is a starting point as
7 well as folks who are also impacted by the system.
8 That's why I allowed, um, Ms. Wallace earlier to
9 testify first. We usually do our hearings. We wanna
10 hear from the folks that are impacted by the system.
11 How can we help them? How can we support? How can we
12 sit around? This is not the first and last hearing.
13 You'll be seeing us again and again having these
14 conversations. Next month we have a foster youth
15 shadow day. The foster youth come here, we tell them
16 it's their voice that guides this work for us, just
17 so you know. Thank you so much. Next panel, Nubia
18 Fields, Megan Grunlund. Am I saying it right? If
19 I'm not, please forgive me. Um, hmm, er, ah, mhm,
20 I'm not reading this handwriting. What do you see?
21 Unique Perez, Camastro, Lorraine. Am I saying it
right? I can't.

Alright, I'm gonna say-

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: I guess was, uh, um, um, um,
uh, from Forestdale.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: It's Awais from Forestdale.
Am I saying the name right? Oh, okay, okay. Have a
seat. Thank you. You can start.

MEGAN GRUNLUND: Good afternoon, my name is Megan
Grundlund. I'm a lead college success advisor at
Children's Aid. In my role, I support people who are
currently in or previously experienced foster care as
they work towards success in college. A critical
part of that success is access to safe and consistent
housing. We greatly value our strong partnerships
with ACS and CUNY. About 65% of the college students
we serve attend schools, and many rely on CUNY dorms
for year-round housing. Campus housing provides
stability, community, and independence, especially
for students who may not have a family home to return
to during the breaks.

However, we continue to see policies that
unintentionally place students in destabilizing
situations. For example, this summer, the Towers at
City College requires students to enroll in a summer
class in order to remain in campus housing. At the
same time, ACS's College Choice program, which has

1
2 been pivotal in expanding college access for youth in
3 foster care, requires students to engage in
4 professional development during the summer, such as,
5 um, such as employment, internships, or coursework.
6 One student I work with is graduating this May from a
7 2-year CUNY college and transferring to a 4-year CUNY
8 in the fall.

9 Because of the summer enrollment requirement, he
10 is now at risk of losing his housing over the summer.
11 With an appropriate— without an appropriate
12 alternative, he may be forced to move to a temporary
13 placement for just a few months, disrupting the
14 stability at a critical transition point. When
15 housing realities and program expectations are
16 misaligned, students are focused— are forced to
17 choose between remaining housed and pursuing
18 opportunities that support long-term success. For
19 young people who have already experienced
20 instability, these disruptions can be deeply harmful.
21 Children's Aid is grateful for our strong
partnerships with ACS and CUNY, and we stand ready to
work with them and the City Council to better align
summer expectations that students can remain housed
while building their futures. I do have an update on

1 this student that I mentioned. Um, thank you to
2 Shirley and Fauci. Um, as of this morning, um, the
3 student will be granted an exception to be able to
4 stay at the Towers this summer. So thank you for the
5 opportunity to testify.

6 NUBIA FIELDS: Good afternoon. My name is Nubia
7 Fields, and I'm an education specialist with
8 Children's Aid. In my role, I work with high school
9 students and younger college-enrolled youth. As
10 these young people transition from high school to
11 college, they are understandably concerned about
12 whether the supports available to them will be
13 sufficient enough and sustain and sustained to help
14 them succeed.

15 Fortunately, New York City and state have
16 invested in programs like Fair Futures, which
17 meaningfully support young people with foster care
18 experience in pursuing higher education. As a
19 result, more young people with foster care experience
20 are enrolling in college and working towards a
21 degree. However, the continued success of these
programs depends on funding that responds to real
service demand. Fair Futures has a \$30.7 million
annual baseline and has grown from serving 3,000

1
2 young people to over 4,600 today. Yet the current
3 funding formula only reflects the number of youth
4 formerly in foster care, leaving out the number of
5 youth ages 21 to 26 who continue receiving services
6 after they exit care.

7 With a limited funding pool,— but a larger
8 service population. This has resulted in fewer
9 per-student resources, like academic, advising, and
10 stability-focused supports that young people need to
11 succeed in college. In practice, staff are
12 supporting more students with fewer resources, even
13 as young people face rising housing, academic, and
14 mental health challenges. Also, Fair Futures
15 provides only partial funding for trauma-informed
16 mental health services, contributing to unmet needs
17 across the city, especially for older youth who no
18 longer have the safety net of being formally in care.

19 Without increased investment, we risk undermining
20 the very progress these programs were designed to
21 achieve. I urge the Council to work with community
partners, CUNY, and ACS to support increased Fair
Futures funding that reflects service demands and the
true costs of supporting foster youth through college

1 completion. Thank you for your leadership and the
2 opportunity to talk testify.

3 LORRAINE GONZALES-CAMASTRA: Good afternoon.
4 Good afternoon. Uh, my name is Lorraine
5 Gonzalez-Camasta. I am the Assistant Executive
6 Director for Policy and Practice at Forestdale.
7 Thank you, Chairs and Members of the Committees, for
8 the opportunity to speak today on behalf of
9 Forestdale. For more than 172 years, Forestdale has
10 stood with Queens families during their most
11 challenging moments, ensuring that children grow up
12 in, in safe, supported, and surrounded by the people
13 who love them.

14 Today, the message I bring is simple and urgent.
15 Higher education is one of the most powerful tools we
16 have to break patterns of instability for young
17 people in foster care. A college degree doesn't just
18 open doors to better jobs, it expands a young
19 person's lifetime earning potential, strengthens
20 their financial independence, and creates the
21 foundation for long-term stability.

When foster youth succeed in higher education,
they are not only changing their own trajectory, they
are disrupting cycles of transgenerational economic

1 hardship and building a new legacy of opportunity for
2 the families they will one day lead. At Forestale,
3 we believe that college access is not a luxury, it's
4 a critical intervention that disrupts cycles of
5 poverty, expands economic mobility, and affirms for
6 young people that their future is worth investing in.

7 Our staff work intensively with youth beginning
8 in early high school, building academic readiness,
9 supporting college exploration, and ensuring that
10 every young person has a post-secondary plan that
11 aligns with their goals. I want to highlight a
12 hallmark achievement that reflects both the
13 resilience of our youth and the intentionality of our
14 programs programming.

15 In 2025, 95% of foster care youth served by
16 Forestdale graduated from high school and 74%
17 enrolled in college. Many youth choose CUNY
18 institutions because they offer affordability, strong
19 academic programs, and a sense of community that is
20 especially meaningful for young people navigating
21 foster care. But this success is not accidental. It
requires sustained investment in college access,
staff tutoring, financial aid navigation, mental
health supports, and year-round coaching. It

1 requires partnership with CUNY to ensure that our
2 youth are not only admitted but retained and
3 supported through graduation.

4 We urge the Council to continue strengthening
5 pathways between foster care and higher education
6 through funding, accountability, and through policies
7 that recognize the unique challenges our youth face.
8 Forestale stands ready to partner with you to ensure
9 that every young person in foster care has real,
10 supported, and an achievable path to a college
11 degree. Thank you for your leadership and the
12 opportunity to testify.

13 UNIQUE PEREZ: Hello, can you hear me okay?
14 Okay. Hello, Chairs and Council um, my name is
15 Unique Perez, and I'm the college specialist at
16 Forestdale doing a lot of the work that we've been
17 talking about today. Um, I work directly with youth
18 in foster care as they navigate high school
19 completion, college admissions, and the transition
20 into post-secondary life.

21 Every day I see firsthand the determination of
our young people and the barriers they face. Many of
our youth are balancing school with part-time jobs,
family responsibilities, housing instability, or the

1
2 emotional weight of system involvement. Yet they
3 show up, they study, they dream big, and they push
4 forward. My role is to make sure that they don't
5 have to do it alone. I ensure students are on track
6 to graduate high school, complete FAFSA and TAP
7 applications, write personal statements, compare
8 financial aid packages, and understand the realities
9 of college life.

10 I accompany them on CUNY campus tours, connect
11 them with opportunity programs like SEEK and ASAP and
12 advocate for accommodations or supports when
13 challenges arise. The statistic shared earlier, 74%
14 of Forestale youth enrolling in college in 2025, is
15 not just a number to me. I can picture the faces
16 behind it. I remember the student who thought
17 college would be a waste of time until attending an
18 ASAP info session, or the young man here with us
19 today who almost gave up when his financial aid was
20 delayed, but with support persisted and is now
21 thriving in his second semester.

These successes are possible because of
consistent individualized support, but the need is
growing and the system is stretched. We need
continued investment in college access programming,

1
2 mental health supports, and partnerships with CUNY
3 that ensure our youth are admitted, retained, and
4 graduating. Our young people are capable of
5 extraordinary things when given the right tools.
6 Thank you for supporting the work that makes their
7 success possible.

8 AWAIS NOVAZ: Oh, can you hear me? Oh, can you
9 hear me now? Alright. Uh, hello, Chairs and Members
10 of the Council. My name is Awais Novaz, and I am a
11 youth in foster care and a current student at BMCC.
12 Uh, I'm here today to highlight the real-world impact
13 that programs like FYSCI and College Choice have had
14 on my life. Um, so when I was a child, I really
15 wanted to go to college, but when I entered foster
16 care a few years ago, it became less of a dream and
17 more of a chore. Um, and I was unsure if I would be
18 able to meet the academic demands of higher
19 education, but I was also eager to prove myself.

20 Um, and the staff at Forestdale gradually made it
21 seem less of a future headache for me and more of a
22 chance to do what I always wanted to do. Um, and
23 after applying to CUNY, filling out financial aid
24 forms, and, um, with help, you know, refining my
25 goals as a student, I'm— throughout this first year

1 of college, I've slowly gained confidence in my own
2 ability and worth. And since then, I've only aimed
3 higher than before. Um, college has been a little
4 challenging still, and being a youth in care and a
5 full-time student is a difficult experience.

6 Um, but having adequate support and safety nets,
7 um, people like Shirley and FYSCI and, uh, my college
8 specialist, Unique, and staff at Forest Hill, and,
9 um, College Choice program has really expanded my
10 world and given me more faith in my own dreams. Um,
11 and I feel a sense of direction in my life, and I
12 feel like I can accomplish anything that I put my
13 mind to.

14 Um, and being at CUNY has been a really positive
15 experience. I've met like-minded people. I can take
16 classes whenever I want, and I can study in a way
17 that works for me. Um, I'm a human services major
18 and I'm hoping to become a program director in the
19 future and help people like me and, you know, lead by
20 example for other people. Um, and I'm here today to
21 ask you to keep supporting programs like FYSCI and,
uh, College Choice, um, that help people like me
because I believe that we all have the ability to
succeed and reach the same heights as other people.

1
2 Um, we just need the right support to get there. Uh,
3 and thank you for hearing my perspective.

4 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: We'd like to recognize
5 Council Member Dinowitz. Do you have any questions?
6 Thank you. Following panel: Bonnie Langer, Michael
7 Zink, Wendy Finkel, Klo Vinson- Vinson- Rashad
8 Pierce. Okay, okay, thank you, thank you. Thank
9 you. Alright, you may begin.

10 Um, thank you, Chair Stevens and Joseph and
11 Members of the Council. Uh, my name is Michael Zink,
12 and I am the Co-Executive Director of At the Table, a
13 nonprofit founded in 2020 that provides long-term
14 personalized college tutoring, advising, and
15 wraparound support to 160 students with lived
16 experience of foster care.

17 Um, thank you to McKeema for the shout-out
18 earlier. Um, we never reject or eject students based
19 on their grades, academic standing, age, or how or
20 when they left foster care. More than 50% of the
21 college students in our first two cohorts have
already earned degrees, and many more are on track.
We are led in this work by a board of directors
majority composed of people with lived experience of
foster care.

1
2 At the Table works closely with the FYSE program
3 at CUNY where 85% of our students attend, and we're
4 the higher education training partner for Fair
5 Futures. I previously led educational services at
6 the Foundling where we helped launch the program that
7 became College Choice, and these new programs
8 represent incredible progress, but there remain major
9 opportunities areas for growth. I'll share a couple
10 here, and we will be submitting more extensive
11 written testimony.

12 First, there is an immense gap in the quality-
13 the quantity of support available to students
14 currently in foster care and students formerly in
15 foster care. To give one example, the College Choice
16 Program excludes any student who leaves foster care
17 prior to enrolling in the program. This means that
18 if a student ages out of foster care before they are
19 able to start attending college, or if they are
20 adopted at the age of 17 and attend college at 18,
21 they are fully and permanently ineligible for tens of
thousands of dollars in funding.

While FYSE is a critical resource for students
who have left foster care, it is funded, as you
heard, at a tiny fraction of what College Choice

1 gets. And whether by extending College Choice
2 eligibility or by matching state funding for CUNY's
3 FYSE program, the city should work to ensure that no
4 one has to choose between permanency and robust
5 college support.

6 Second, for students currently in foster care,
7 the College Choice process must be simplified and
8 made more accessible. To give one example, the
9 program now requires all participants to earn at
10 least 65% of their attempted credits starting in
11 their very first semester, a separate and higher
12 standard than what is required by TAP and Pell
13 Grants.

14 So a student who takes 5 classes, withdraws from
15 2, and earns Bs in, in 3 in their first semester
16 would be in good academic standing in college, but
17 they could find themselves on College Choice
18 probation.

19 This standard should be loosened, particularly
20 for new students in the program. And lastly, the
21 onerous documentation requirements for College Choice
can and should be streamlined. New York State's ETB
program for Youth with Foster Care Experience has an
independent contractor that verifies student

1
2 eligibility directly with each college where they
3 attend.

4 Meanwhile, College Choice students are each in-
5 individually screenshotting their school's academic
6 calendars to upload as PDFs, uh, alongside many other
7 documents every semester. A CUNY ACS MOU, as well as
8 a thoughtful reimagining of what documents are
9 actually needed by ACS would vastly reduce the burden
10 on students to be in foster care or to have
11 experience of foster care should not mean that you
12 have to swim through paperwork towards the
13 opportunities that you deserve. Thank you so much
14 for your time.

15 BONNIE LANGER: Good afternoon, Chair Stevens,
16 Joseph, and Members of the Committees on Children and
17 Youth and Higher Education. Thank you for the
18 opportunity to testify on strengthening higher
19 education Pathways for Youth in Care attending CUNY.

20 My name is Bonnie Langer, Vice President of
21 Community-Based Education Programs at the New York
Foundling, or the Foundling. For over 155 years, the
Foundling has partnered with communities to support
stability, independence, and well-being for more than
30,000 individuals annually across New York and the

1 island of Puerto Rico. Our work spans education,
2 child welfare, health, behavioral health,
3 developmental disabilities, and justice systems with
4 a strong focus on improving outcomes for youth in
5 foster care. The data is clear. Only 4% of youth
6 formerly in foster care earn a bachelor's degree by
7 age 26, and many face barriers to employment and
8 long-term stability.

9 Most enroll in community colleges with limited
10 support, and few complete their degrees. This is why
11 targeted, sustained interventions are critical.
12 College Choice Support Services, developed in
13 partnership with ACS but born out of the earlier dorm
14 project, provides comprehensive support to youth in
15 care pursuing higher education. Since redesigning
16 the program in 2022, we now support 125 students with
17 college applications, financial aid, advisement,
18 tutoring, and career counseling, ensuring not just
19 access but persistence and graduation.

20 We have worked with 138 colleges nationwide,
21 including 20 CUNY campuses. We also work with
students in international study abroad programs.
Each year we process over \$4 million in tuition and
housing payments for more than 400 students, as my

1 colleagues at ACS shared earlier, helping prevent
2 disruptions in enrollment. Complementing this work
3 is our Road to Success tutoring program, a
4 trauma-informed tutoring initiative serving nearly
5 700 youth annually across 19 foster care agencies in
6 Road to Success.

7 Road to Success addresses academic gaps caused by
8 instability and trauma through individualized
9 one-on-one tutoring. The results are striking. In
10 2025, 99% of participating seniors graduated high
11 school compared to just 42% citywide for youth in
12 foster care. And over the past 4 years, Road to
13 Success has achieved a 100% graduation rate among its
14 seniors.

15 Together, these programs create a continuum of
16 support from early academic intervention through
17 college completion while connecting youth to broader
18 services like health, behavioral health, and
19 supportive housing that support their overall
20 well-being. Building on this success, Road to
21 Success has expanded to serve justice-involved youth
prevention programs and Mott Haven Academy Charter
School with plans to reach young people experiencing

homelessness and further scale model— can I finish?
Okay.

Youth in care are capable and resilient. With
the right support, they succeed. Continued
investment in programs like College Choice and Road
to Success is essential to improving educational
outcomes and strengthening the city's future. We
urge the Council to sustain and expand funding for
these proven models. Thank you for your commitment
to New York City's youth.

RASHAD PIERCE: Good afternoon. Can you guys
hear me? Um, good afternoon. You guys hear me? Um,
hello, good afternoon. My name is Rashad Pierce. I
am currently a foster youth. I often feel like my
voice wasn't heard coming into JCCA. I deal with a
lot of transformations, especially the change within
my case managing. I didn't always know how to speak
up for myself nor navigate the system around me.
JCCA LEAP gave me an opportunity with support and
guidance I needed to better understand my rights and
how to advocate for what I needed. They created a—
they created a, um, space where I felt I can be
listened, respected, and engaged to support my goals
and concerns with no fear.

1
2 I figured- excuse me- I struggled with my
3 previous schools and grades reflected that.
4 Throughout their education services, JCCA LEAP has
5 stayed with me on track, finding the right schools
6 and feeling more confident in my academic journey. I
7 received support with planning, stayed organized, and
8 understanding what steps I needed to take to reach my
9 goals. Wherever I felt unsure, there was always
10 someone to guide me and help me solve my problems.
11 That consist- made me- made a big difference and
12 helped me stay motivated in- during challen-
13 challenging times. Because of JCCA, I've grown into
14 someone who I felt confidently speaking up and
15 advocating for myself. I no longer feel alone when
16 facing challenges, and I know how to express what I
17 need to in order to succeed. Their support helped me
18 not only with my education but also building
19 confidence and finding my voice. Now I feel
20 empowered to keep pushing forward to take control of
21 my future. Thank you for listening.

18 KLO VINSON: Hello, are you hearing me? Okay, my
19 name is Klo, Klo Vinson. Um, I am a youth in care at
20 JCCA, and, um, I feel like the program I'm in, um,
21 Fair Futures, is like really helpful to me as I like,

1 um, like, aged out of, like, care and stuff and
2 started, like, living on my own because I feel like
3 they really helped me, like, as I learned to, like,
4 be independent and learn to live on my own. Because
5 to be honest, when I first heard about living on my
6 own, I was kind of, like, scared because I was like,
7 what horror movie y'all trying to put me in? Because
8 I didn't really, like, like, like the idea.

9 I, like, I wasn't used to it. So, like, you
10 know, but I feel like, uh, as I got into it, they
11 made things like easier. And when I did it, I was
12 like, you know, it ain't that bad. Like, you know it
13 isn't a horror movie. This is actually fun. It's
14 nice. So I feel like they help provide me with stuff
15 because I'm not gonna lie, living on your own is a
16 different language because they started like, you
17 know, when them bills come in and all them stuff.
18 Yeah. Yeah, I started seeing certain things, like
19 when I saw bills, I had to call, like, my, my youth
20 coach, because I was like, what is this? Like, what,
21 what does this mean? Like, they talking money and a
bunch of zeros. I'm like, do I owe, or do they owe
me? Like, what is happening? So, but I feel like it
was good to have someone to call and to help me,

1 like, you know, so I don't just lose it, you know?
2 So I feel like programs like that is very helpful.
3 Even other things -like, like, trying to figure out,
4 like, like, other stuff, like school and stuff. But
5 in my area, I feel like it's a little- was a little
6 tricky for me.

7 I will say one thing I could, you know, I would
8 have liked to see more is, like, they had- because
9 me, my experience a little different when it came to-
10 oh, okay. My ex- my experience was a little
11 different when it came to, like, the school route,
12 like, I wasn't someone who, oh, who wanted to, like,
13 go to, like, school, school. I'm someone in the
14 arts.

15 So I wanted something of more programs, like,
16 places where it was, like, art programs. And I feel
17 like when I first, like, became of age, there wasn't
18 much people who knew things like my route. Like,
19 they knew the usual route, the usual school. So I
20 was - I had, like, people who know, like, mhm, mhm,
21 mhm, more art programs or things to put me in to help
me.

Like, 'cause I eventually found, like, certain
things 'cause I engaged in other, like, things in my

1 field but it was a lot of, like, self-searching out.
2 Like maybe other youths coming after me could have,
3 like, more people who, like, know, you know, more
4 things for them so they can also know, like, where to
5 go to. 'Cause then when I started finding out
6 certain programs, I was a little older, so certain
7 things I would apply for kind of reached my age
8 limit, and it was like, oh. So it was a little
9 harder looking for certain things. So, I just wish
that process would be easier, so yeah.

10 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: More creative space for
creators, right?

11 KLO VINSON: Yeah, yeah, more people who I feel
12 like choose a different route because I feel like
13 different people have different things and certain
14 people want to go to college, certain people might
15 want to do trades, and I feel like, or other
16 programs. But so other people who have those, who
17 choose a different route, like, they know where to
18 go. They don't just be like, well, I don't know what
19 to do, or I'm just gonna sit in lounge like they,
20 like, have more research, because sometimes you just
21 don't know and you just have to do it on your own.

1
2 Like me, I had to like, do it on my own, but, you
3 know, yeah.

4 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Got it. Very helpful.
5 Thank you.

6 KLO VINSON: You're welcome.

7 WENDY FINKEL: That's helpful for me too. You
8 shouldn't have to do it on your own. Um, good
9 morning, Chairs Joseph, Stevens, and Members of the
10 Committee. Um, thank you for the opportunity for our
11 JCCA youth, um, Klo and Rashad, to testify.

12 Um, every year— oh, I am, hmm, I'm Wendy Finkel,
13 Vice President of Strategic Partnerships at JCCA.
14 Every year, JCCA foster youth tremendously benefit
15 from CUNY Pathways. CUNY colleges are less expensive
16 than private colleges, and our students generally
17 attend at no cost with the help of New York State
18 Tuition Assistance Program and federal Pell Grants.
19 ACS's College Choice Program also reduces financial
20 concerns, allowing foster youth to reduce stress and
21 focus on their studies.

Youth receive \$60 per day for every day they're
enrolled in college. These funds are used for meals,
room and board, books, and other college student
expenses. ACS's College Choice Program also provides

1
2 a tutor, someone to check in with the youth for
3 support and navigate housing subsidies, um, giving
4 the young people flexibility to meet their needs.

5 For example, one JCCA youth preferred to live
6 outside the dorms near campus, and College Choice
7 Program now supports these choices. JCCA does have
8 current and former foster youth who benefit from
9 these programs and grants and choose to attend
10 college away from home, and we support every child's
11 choice.

12 It should be noted that JCCA's foster youth have
13 been more likely to graduate from CUNY schools such
14 as Hunter, Lehman, Bronx Community College, and City
15 Tech than those who choose schools far away.

16 For JCCA students who attend CUNY programs, they
17 generally remain in communities they know with their
18 support systems nearby. Additionally, as young
19 people approach high school graduation, they may not
20 be clear on their future goals, and some of our youth
21 elect to take a gap year and then enroll in a CUNY
program.

Many young people describe feeling unprepared to
manage housing, finances, and adult respons-
responsibilities on their own. Um, that's fine. Um,

1 we strongly encourage the city to continue to invest
2 in supports for current and former foster youth, um,
3 who are pursuing secondary education, vocational
4 training, or joining the workforce. Funding that
5 supports truly affordable housing or youth programs
6 that are flexible and responsive to young people say
7 they need makes a difference. Thank you for inviting
8 us to testify today.

9 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Thank you. And that's why
10 we had asked for CUNY to hear maybe a creative arts
11 space as well for young people with internships and
12 mentorship. Thank you so much. Thank you for your
13 notes. Jaclyn Goodman and Jasiyah Gilbert. Anyone
14 else is here to testify and did not fill out one of
15 these forms?

16 JACLYN GOODMAN: My name is Jaclyn Goodman and
17 I'm an attorney with the Legal Aid Society Juvenile
18 Rights Practice. We represent the majority of youth
19 in family court across the city who are in foster
20 care, including those nearing or entering adulthood,
21 many of whom choose to go to college. I wanna note
we are submitting more complete written testimony in
addition to my remarks today.

1
2 Young people who have experienced foster care are
3 nearly 5 times less likely to complete 2 or 4-year
4 degrees than students in the population as a whole.
5 These youth face significant barriers to educational
6 success and must persevere to get to the point where
7 college enrollment is even a possibility. Young
8 people who have experienced foster care often lack
9 stable support systems and face frequent school and
10 placement disruptions, leading to, leading to
11 learning loss and fragile academic foundations.

12 They also tend to have complex mental health
13 needs shaped by experiences of trauma, instability,
14 and unmet basic needs. These challenges often
15 persist in college and create additional barriers to
16 success.

17 A young woman who I will call Aaliyah is a former
18 client whose experience demonstrates the importance
19 of expanding college supports for foster youth. She
20 entered foster care at age 14, and despite
21 significant instability in her placements, persisted
in pursuing her education and earned her TASC diploma
shortly after becoming a parent at age 20.

While preparing to age out of care and secure
housing, Aaliyah was accepted to the Borough of

1
2 Manhattan Community College for fall 2024. Her
3 eligibility for ACS's College Choice program
4 depended- depended on the fact that she had not yet
5 turned 21 when the College Choice application opened,
6 because youth are required to be in foster care when
7 they first apply and are admitted.

8 Aaliyah has told us many times that College
9 Choice is- and its significant financial support made
10 it a reality for her to attend college while also
11 parenting her daughter and living independently.

12 Aaliyah has completed 4 semesters and is now on track
13 to graduate with her associate's degree in business
14 in January 2027. If Aaliyah's birthday had been just
15 1 week later, she would have no longer been eligible
16 for College Choice.

17 May I? I only have a few more remarks. College
18 Choice should change their policies considering that
19 many youth with foster care experience do not follow
20 the typical timeline and are often ready to enter
21 college once they are at ages where they are no
longer in care. And I've, um, we propose 4
recommendations.

Um, first, um, to increase funding for College
Choice to serve all college-bound youth in foster

1
2 care, including those who have less foster care with,
3 within the past 6 months. Um, we also wanna note
4 that ACS should also begin paying all College Choice
5 students their stipends timely at the beginning of
6 the semester. That doesn't always happen.

7 Second, expand ACS's Fair Futures mentorship
8 program to eliminate waitlists and ensure timely
9 access to coaches for all older youth. Third, and I
10 know, Chair Joseph, you mentioned this, I, I also saw
11 CUNY's Reconnect program. I think a similar program
12 that offers completion, retention, and forgiveness
13 grants for youth with foster care backgrounds would
14 be, um, is very important for our youth to start,
15 continue, and complete their education.

16 And finally, um, this has been discussed, we
17 would also support measures that allow ACS to collect
18 and share data about college, college success for
19 youth. Thank you.

20 JASIYAH GILBERT: Good afternoon. My name is
21 Jasiya Gilbert, and I'm the Client and Community
Engagement Manager at the Legal Aid Society's
Juvenile Rights practice. I am here both as a CUNY
graduate and a former foster youth. I'm proud to say
that I made it to and through college, but I want to

1
2 be clear, I did not get there on my own. I had
3 support. I received a Fair Futures education coach,
4 someone who helped me navigate systems that were not
5 designed with young people like me in mind.

6 From financial aid to enrollment to just having
7 someone in my corner, that support made a real
8 difference for me. I also benefited from programs
9 like HeartShare's American Dream Program, which
10 similar to College Choice provided me with a stipend.
11 That support helped me meet my basic needs so I could
12 focus on school and securing internships. But I also
13 wanna name something briefly: awareness. We can have
14 strong programs like College Choice and FYSE, but if
15 young people don't know they exist, they can't access
16 them.

17 Too many of my peers simply had no idea these
18 supports were available. Because the reality is
19 this: for young people coming out of foster care,
20 college is not just about academics. It's about
21 stability. It's about whether you can afford food,
books, transportation, or even an OmniCard to get to
class. And too often, those basic needs go unmet.
That is why the recommendations in our testimony—
matters so much.

1
2 We need to expand programs like College Choice so
3 that all young people who wanna go to college can
4 access that support, not just some. We need to
5 expand Fair Futures so that no young person is left
6 on a waitlist when what they need is guidance and
7 consistency. And we need CUNY to recognize that
8 students impacted by the foster system are navigating
9 real financial barriers by offering flexibility,
10 grace periods, and targeted grants so that a small
11 fee doesn't derail an entire future. Because I've
12 lived it, I know what it feels like to have the
13 potential but also the pressure, the uncertainty, and
14 the gaps in support.

15 And I also know what happens when the right
16 support is in place. Young people succeed. So this
17 is not just about policy, it's about disability.
18 It's about making sure that the next young person,
19 someone just like me, doesn't just get into college
20 but has a real chance to stay, succeed, and graduate.
21 Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: We'll take those
recommendations. Thank you.

JASIYAH GILBERT: Excellent.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Okay, thank you so, so much.
That concludes the in-person portion of our public
testimony. We will now move to remote testimony.

If you're testifying remotely, please listen for
your name to be called. Once your name is called, a
member of our team, our staff, will unmute you. You
may then start your testimony once the Sergeant at
Arms sets the clock and cues you to begin. Where's
the— where's the— oh yeah, it's just here.

First person will be Cheyenne Deopersaud(SP?),
and Cheyenne.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

CHEYENNE DEOPERSAUD: Yep, I'm here. Hi, Council
Member Joseph and Council Member Stevens. It's
really good to see you all. I've been here since the
morning, um, but anyway, I'll start.

Hi, my name is Cheyenne, and I'm from HeartShare
St. Vincent Services, and I'm a board member of At
the Table, which you heard, um, other people speak
from, which is an organization that supports New York
City students with foster care backgrounds in
college. Um, and I wanted to say that higher
education is a vital pathway to success for young
people. But for students with foster care experience

1
2 to have a real chance at pursuing long-term goals
3 like a college diploma, they really, really need safe
4 and affordable and quality places to live. And so we
5 can't, um, overlook housing. And in the brief for
6 this hearing, I read it, it says that a young person
7 named Harmony said, in much of the literature, people
8 are speaking for us, and I wanna find more spaces to
9 bring people with these lived experiences together so
10 that our voices are centered.

11 So I wanted to take a moment to do exactly that
12 by bringing forward both lived experience and data
13 from research that I've conducted when I was a policy
14 entrepreneur at a think tank called Next100. And
15 right now there are 3— only 3 main housing options
16 available to youth aging out of foster care, which is
17 vouchers, NYCHA, and supportive housing. Um, and
18 across the board, these options are relatively across
19 the board lead to low-quality living conditions.

20 In a survey that I conducted, um, earlier last
21 year of 57 youth, 72 reported roaches and 58 reported
rats in their homes. In a separate analysis I did
over 100 supportive housing buildings where foster
youth are being placed across New York City, I found
an average of 46 open housing violations per building

1 with one building reaching as high as 322 open
2 violations. And out of all of the supportive
3 housings, 33 are located in the Bronx and 56 are
4 located in Brooklyn. That really means that nearly
5 80% of these placements are concentrated in just 2
6 boroughs throughout the city.

7 Um, and in the precinct where these buildings are
8 located, there are on average 32 reported rapes, 274
9 robberies, and 592 felony assaults per year in those
precincts where foster youth are being placed.

10 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you. Your time is
11 expired.

12 CHEYENNE DEOPERSAUD: Can I continue?

13 CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: Yes, you can continue.

14 CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Go ahead, Cheyenne.

15 CHEYENNE DEOPERSAUD: Okay, it's okay. Um, and I
16 know that was a lot of data to hear, but-- and it can
17 feel overwhelming, but imagine what it feels like to
18 live in these conditions, especially during the years
19 where we're trying to become stable, independent
20 adults and also get a college diploma. I was one of
21 these people who lived in these buildings. These
aren't isolated cases, they're patterns, and patterns
lead to policy. And that's why I developed

1
2 legislation that could create a pathway for young
3 people aging out of the foster care system into the
4 New York City Housing Lottery, giving us access to
5 safe, high-quality housing in neighborhoods that
6 support our growth. And not only that, help us build
7 our foundation on life with unstable ground. And
8 right now, foster youth are given the highest
9 priority for NYCHA housing. But what does it mean if
10 housing were— if the housing we're being given and
11 prioritized for has some of the worst conditions?
12 There's a difference between doing something for us
13 and doing something right.

14 Um, if the priority doesn't come with quality,
15 then it's not a solution, it's a shortcut. Um, last
16 year I had the privilege of interviewing Council
17 Member Joseph, and she said, and I quote, "we have to
18 be intentional. Foster youth cannot be an
19 afterthought."

20 If we truly want placements to support healing
21 and opportunity, then we need to think about equity
in zoning and funding and in school access from the
start. She said that we need to have the same
mindset when it comes to housing, intentionally

1
2 placing youth in environments that uplift them, not
3 re-traumatize them.

4 She said that there has never been a specific
5 niche or category carved out for foster youth in
6 housing policy the way there is for seniors. And so
7 foster youth are being placed, um, it's like, oh,
8 just push them into that little gap right there. And
9 that's what she said, and that really stuck with me.
10 And this week, a bill about this that I wrote is
11 being introduced at the state level. Um, I worked
12 with Senator Jabari Brisport's office to create a
13 priority pathway for youth within the housing
14 lottery.

15 And so policy does not end at an introduction of
16 a policy, and it does not succeed without alignment
17 from the city level as well. And that's where you
18 all come in. And I wanna just put this on your radar
19 and just be in discussion about this bill with you
20 and then just talk about it and hopefully it gets
21 passed and everything works out so these youth can
have this stable quality housing that we really
deserve.

COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION JOINTLY WITH THE
COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH 169

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: Thank you, Cheyenne, and
definitely we'll set up a meeting so we can talk more
about housing policies. Thank you.

CHEYENNE DEOPERSAUD: Awesome, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: You're welcome. Fatoumata
Ebame, are you online?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin. Patrice Demis,
are you online?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

CHAIRPERSON JOSEPH: That's it. Okay, good. Is
there anyone online we did not call on? Please use
the raise hand feature. Nope. Alright, I'm doubting
myself. Thank you all. [GAVEL]

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date August 24, 2026