# Centro C.H.A. Inc.

Community Hispanic Association

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Monday, January 13, 2014

**Attention: LA County Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection**

Dear Honorable Commission Members,

On behalf of the organization Centro CHA, and the youth who have provided their testimony today on the day of January 13, 2014, I would like to thank the Los Angeles Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection for your leadership and opportunity to testify before the commission to provide recommendations that will improve the child welfare system and provide a better quality of life for all youth.

Centro C.H.A. Inc. is a non-profit organization based in City of Long Beach with the mission to enrich the lives of the most underserved populations in the City. For more than a decade, Centro CHA has provided a record of services through our various workforce and educational programs. Centro CHA is known in the community for its compassionate services and culturally competent staff and caseworkers who understand the adversities youth and families face everyday living in some of the most challenging neighborhoods of the city.

It is with great honor that I present to you, on behalf of the organization, a formal written letter that provides recommendation on best promising practices and recommendations to improving the interface between education and child welfare.

- **In general, youth living in tough neighborhoods have issues with coping with violence and other experiences that affect their mental and emotional well-being; this is even truer for youth in foster care. Schools need to provide mental health counseling and/or a peer support groups on an ongoing basis for foster youth to help build their resilience against toxic stress in the environment.**

- **DCFS and Schools need to have special tracking systems that is unique in a way where a Foster Youth personal and academic records are safeguarded and easily accessibly especially for youth who transition in and out of foster homes on a continuous basis**

- **Schools need to be the center of treatment and be better equipped to support foster students in school. Harsh School Discipline policies often times create more harm, and has been proven to decrease a student's academic performance in school. Schools need to search for alternatives to suspensions and expulsions for students with behavior issues especially for foster youth.**

- **And Last, DCFS and Schools need to collaborate better with community based organizations that are culturally competent, and who can provide support for students to achieve academic and career success and that offer Leadership development, academic coaching, workforce development training opportunities that can assist Foster Youth as they transition into adulthood and out of the DCFS System.**

Sincerely,

Jessica Quintana

Jessica Quintana
Executive Director and President
Centro C.H.A. Inc.

Hello everybody, my name is Rosa Pina. I am here today on behalf of CENTRO CHA. Our director Jessica Quintana has honored me to be involved here today to share with you how I feel the department of social services can improve and also to demonstrate the causes and effects it has on children's education. I myself am a word of the court and have been through these allegations with my siblings and relatives.

The department of social services can very much improve their routines in many ways. The outcome of these circumstances in life has left me literally traumatized when I hear the word ~~BPSS~~ DCFS. My legs lock, my heart pounds, and I myself have no children to even consider being a victim of social workers. I want to thank Jessica Quintana for giving me this opportunity to share my impression of these topics.

Here's my story,

Being as young as 5 years old, it was tough seeing mom come and go because a social worker made a decision that it was not up to me or my mother to let us be a family like the rest of my classmates in school.It was hard. Missing school to go to family court was embarrassing to share with other classmates. It made me a liar. At the end of every year, my father would send gifts from prison for Christmas (I still don't know exactly how that worked out) but it did. He never missed a holiday to tell me how much he loved me and wish I'd be successful in whatever it was I decided to conquer in life. Originally I was supposed to graduate in the year 2007'. However circumstances of being a foster child made me believe that education is not the cost of a successful life, because I was so worried all the time on how the next days and weeks were going to turn out to be at home. I remember some of my classmates went through these obstacles as I did, and we really didn't have an attitude of those who were at home and rose by biological family members.

Living with a foster parent, with children, put my siblings and I in a hate mode. Even though it was family who took custody of us, it was more like war. My older sibling was demanded to care for us. My cousin who was the son of the guardian was sent away to San Diego because it was too much for our aunt to control all of us. I remember my cousin and brother making baloney through an iron because we were not able to get what was in our refrigerator. We lived off of top a' roman because our guardian was never around. We were not bad kids; we just didn't live up to her expectations. If one of us was in trouble, we all got in trouble. We didn't get toys taken away; we had to have pants down, in a row, one by one, swatted. Her daughter was so spoiled, we grew hate toward that side of our family and being as young as we were, we never got counseled on why. All we knew was our mother wasn't around to save us. Through it all, we never missed a court date; Why did this have to happen, I ask myself daily?Did she ever get reported?? NO. Did social workers see the trauma she put us all through? **Today in 2014, we have no contact with our foster parent. I thank God my mother turned her life around to care for us the way she was supposed to.**

So, the three of us, biological siblings were put through that mess. I also have a sister who was given custody of her aunt as well. The day we got her back, her stories made us siblings stronger than ever. She was beat with switches, never went to school, and had seen her grandmother on her dads side

pass away in the bathroom. She was the one to find her and she is the toughest one of all of us today. What the department of social services did to our family, there is no cure.

My mom had to fight hard to keep us around. Our experience with foster care will never be a good story to tell, although this program is to protect families and children. They don't ensure the well-being of a child. We are still left with scars from being a word of the court. Trauma, with abandonment; we were forced to teach ourselves how to survive and who we can trust.

Social workers need to realize that they are affecting every child's life in a negative or positive way but unfortunately my sibling and I have felt the negative effects.

With my circumstances, I feel I speak for many others who are traumatized as well. I'd like to go further, and give a worker a bit of advice on how they can improve. Many workers and children go through this stage in life, every day. It holds our innocence; in a workers hands, and they fail to show how education is the most important factor in life, as well as a daily routine in homes today. I hope my story, reopens social workers beliefs on what is a fit home for children.

One important change I think needs to be done is in school grounds.Schools are not the place to interrogate ones children because it interferes the whole aspect of trust in home and school. It's embarrassing to families, staff and the students. Many workers do this as in allegation. It really doesn't make sense without parent consent. Children then feel like they are in this world to fight for no apparent reason. The way they go about it, makes our self-esteem lower than what it already tends to be. We cannot trust our own parents because social workers make us feel like they are doing something wrong. Unless it's a life or death situation I'd understand but in many cases it's a waste of time.

One factor of social services that needs to change is the attitude towards each and every worker. We need to hire better caring social workers in all. Children are scared to open their mouths to a worker about abuse because they don't like to move around so many times. Social workers need to open their minds and put themselves in the children's shoes every now and then. Show some empathy in each visit. Social workers need to open their eyes and see what each home holds for that foster child. Don't judge the book by its cover but actually open it and make sense of child's everyday life.

The way social workers use these routines has effects in our education. Education is not as easy as it used to be before; therefor there are many possibilities that can set a child into negligence in their community. Children with social workers do not have the innocence of one who is not going through it. This makes education the least factor of a child's life. Even a child doing so well in school does not make any difference in what is going to happen once they get home. Many children do not study as they should because what is going on is in their minds rather than paying attention to study.

All foster parents get money from the state to take care of foster kids but it usually is not spent on the foster child. They abuse that right and leave foster kids with the bare minimum. This includes school clothes. Many children envy on other children because of what they wear and they most times have no say so at home. I think social workers really need to pay attention to these aspects.

Abuse in foster homes needs to be regulated. People need to be criminally charged with these allegations. Many foster children favor their own children; therefor the foster child is left with a broken heart. This is how education becomes a factor. Attitudes at home bring up the attitudes in school.

Thank you for your time.

Salutation: Good Morning esteemed members of the Committee

My name is Marcos Nunez, I am ~~currently~~ 21 years old, ~~and a~~ I am youth Advocate for Centro CHA. I also have been in foster care system most of my life, since the age of 5 years old.

First, I want to thank the commission for giving me the opportunity to share with you my personal story and how I feel we can improve the child welfare system so youth like me can succeed in life.

Between the ages of 5 and 11 years old I did very well in school but I struggled with living and coping with my first foster parents. I was often treated unfairly and as I got to 6th grade year I began to rebel against my foster parents and in school. However, instead of having caring adults who could understand my situation I given harsh punishment for my behavior and was often kicked of class. Eventually I was forced to take medication which made me feel like something was wrong with me, when all I needed was someone to talk to like a therapist or a support group.

It got to a point where I told the social worker that I want to move because I couldn't handle the stress any more. The next home I went to introduced me into gang banging.

At school I was failing all my classes and no one seemed to care whether I failed school or not. I got expelled and I was transferred to R Rex Paris Charter School where I got the support I needed to do well in school. What I felt helped me to do well was there was caring teachers who gave me the one-on-one help I needed to understand what I was learning.

Eventually I was forced to move again because my foster parents failed to provide me a safe and caring environment away from gangs. I was transferred to south Central LA and I attended Lock High School. I felt less supported by DCFS system and I had no one who could advocate for me to help me when things were going bad. The School I went to did not have any records of any credits I earned from my last school and I ended having to redo credits. This made it harder for me to

do well in school, often times I felt like giving up because I was told I would not graduate on time.

Currently I am living on my own in a shelter in Long Beach. I also go to Charter College where I am working on getting my G.E.D, and I am enrolled in Centro CHA's job training program where I am learning the skills I need to help me get a job so I can be more independent.

At this point I would like to recommend to the commission on ways to improve the relationship between the child welfare system and schools are the following:

1) DCFS and Schools need to do a better job at tracking youth within the Child Welfare system, there needs to be a special tracking system so a student's academic record does not get lost.
2) Foster Youth need better support systems in school and in the home. Someone who has the ability to advocate on behalf of the youth to ensure he or she does well in school and beyond school. Help them to learn valuable life lessons like how to manage money, work skills, and even like how to open a bank account
3) We also have to do a better job at listening to foster youth to understand what they need. For example, I always wanted to play sports in school but since my foster parents never allowed me to play I felt like I did not have control over my own life.
4) And last, there needs to be support groups within the schools where Foster Youth can talk to other students who understand what they are going through and help them to cope with the stress they feel at home or at school.

thank you for taking your time in listening to me, and I hope that what I have shared with you is of value. ~~To your~~