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Opening Remarks to “No Place to Live: the Housing Crisis Facing Youth Aging-Out of Foster Care,” a national symposium hosted by the Child Advocacy Clinic of St. John’s School of Law, March 28, 2008

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Opening Remarks to “No Place to Live: the Housing Crisis Facing Youth Aging-Out of Foster Care,” a national symposium hosted by the Child Advocacy Clinic of St. John’s School of Law, March 28, 2008

By Dale Margolin¹

Across the country, everyone is talking about a “housing crisis.” For youth who age out of foster care, just finding a place to sleep each night is a struggle. We know that nationally, 54% of recently aged-out youth are homeless or unstably housed.² In addition, these youth face higher rates of unemployment, under-education, teen pregnancy, and incarceration.³

We are gathered here today to address the unique and dire housing needs of youth aging out of foster care. I would usually begin a Symposium like this with a story of a young person’s plight, an illustration of the injustices this population faces. As you all know, each youth’s story is more tragic than the next. But yet what always surprises and inspires me most, and I am sure the same is true for you, is the incredible resilience these young people demonstrate on a daily basis.

Today, however, we are extremely fortunate to be hearing from an entire panel of youth⁴ We also have two young adults who were formerly in foster care enlightening us on other panels.⁵ So I will let these extraordinary young people speak for themselves.

We are also incredibly lucky because experts in advocacy, scholarly research, and public policy, as well as directors of highly successful programs, are here to explore the intricacies of the housing crisis facing youth aging-out of foster and its potential solutions.⁶

¹ Clinical Professor of Law and Director of the Family Law Clinic at the University of Richmond School of Law. Formerly, Prof. Margolin was the Interim Director and Fellow of the Child Advocacy Clinic at St. John’s School of Law. Prof. Margolin organized this Symposium.

² See Kushel, Margot B., et al. “Homeless and Health Care Access After Emancipation.” *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 10, 2007, 986, 987.

³ See, e.g., Mark E. Courtney, Amy Dworsky & Harold Pollack. *Issue Brief: When Should the State Cease Parenting? Evidence from the Midwest Study*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children, Dec. 2007, 4, available at www.chapinhall.org/article_abstract.aspx?ar=1355; Christine Vestal. “States Trying to Extend Foster-Care Benefits,” Aug. 23, 2007, available at www.stateline.org/live/details/story?contentId=234381.

⁴ Former foster youth, who are involved with the non-profit organizations In the Spirit of the Children (NY) and First Place Fund for Youth (CA), as well as the New York State Office of Children and Families, spoke about their experiences in and aging out of foster care.

⁵ Youth involved with the Youth Advocacy Center in New York and the New York State Office of Children and Families spoke about the framework of housing crisis and innovative programs that address it

⁶ Speakers from Chapin Hall, the Empire State Coalition, the National Coalition to End Youth Homelessness, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, the Vera Institute, Wayne State University, The Chelsea Foyer, the Edwin Gould Academy, First Place Fund for Youth, The Lighthouse Foundation, Stand-up for Kids, the Settlement Housing Fund and the Youth Advocacy

Indeed, I was overwhelmed with interest and enthusiasm when I first began planning this Symposium last spring. This is indicative of a far-reaching awareness of the housing crisis, and a drive to do something about it, to go beyond our respective professional contexts and make a dent here, and everywhere, around the country. The months of planning the Symposium were immensely encouraging.

So now, to set the stage for the work to be done today, I present these brushstrokes (a slideshow of the following statistics, accompanied by photographs of youth, was shown).

- 30,000 young people age out foster care each year in the United States.⁷
- Another estimated 30,000 youth who drop out of state care before their birthdays, because they run away, bringing the total number of young people released yearly from the U.S. foster care system to 60,000.⁸
- 65 percent of these youth need immediate housing upon discharge.⁹
- 40-50 percent of former foster youth become homeless within 18 months of aging-out.¹⁰
- 56 percent of these young people are unemployed when they leave foster care.¹¹
- Only 46 percent of foster youth complete high school, compared to 84% of the general population.¹²
- Fewer than 1 percent of former foster youth finish college, compared to 24% of the general population.¹³
- 27 percent of male children discharged from foster care end up in jail.¹⁴

Center The Brooklyn Young Mothers' Collective, The Children's Aid Society, The Door, Golden Gate University School of Law, and the Legal Aid Society. Ronald Richter, New York City's Family Service Coordinator, The Honorable Gladys Carrión Commissioner, New York State Office of Children and Family Services, and the Rev. Alfonso Wyatt Vice President Fund for the City of New York also presented keynote addresses.

⁷ See www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/youth/janjune05/foster_care_5-19.html

⁸ Id.

⁹ Barriers Facing Foster Care Youth: National and Local Statistics About Emancipating Foster Youth. <http://www.uwba.org/hey/pdfs/HEYFosterYouthStatistics.pdf>

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ See www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/youth/janjune05/foster_care_5-19.html

¹² Barriers Facing Foster Care Youth: National and Local Statistics About Emancipating Foster Youth. <http://www.uwba.org/hey/pdfs/HEYFosterYouthStatistics.pdf>

¹³ Id.

¹⁴ See www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/youth/janjune05/foster_care_5-19.html

- Nearly 50 percent of the young women in foster care have been pregnant by age 19.¹⁵
- All foster care youth in the United States are forced to leave their foster placement at age 18, or by age 21, at the latest.¹⁶
- The average age that young adults who have never experienced foster care leave their family home for good is 24.¹⁷
- 65% of non-foster care youth move back in with their parents as adults at least once after leaving home.¹⁸
- Nearly four million adults between the ages of 25 and 34 are living with their parents.¹⁹
- American parents provide an average of \$38,000 in assistance to their adult children through age 34.²⁰
- Three in ten of the nation's homeless adults report foster care history.²¹

Some states force youth to leave the foster care system age 18. Others allow full or partial benefits until age 19, 20, or 21, but 21 is the absolute cutoff.²²

No matter how you slice it, the young people themselves are the same the day before and the day after these monumental birthdays. Only now they are alone; alone in homeless shelters, alone looking for employment, alone trying to stay in and pay for school, alone searching for child care so they can do all of these things. They are alone in housing court, at fair hearings; alone when grappling with the myriad other issues that are part and parcel of being poor and underserved.

¹⁵ See <http://waysandmeans.house.gov/hearings.asp?formmode=view&id=6354>

¹⁶ Congressional Research Service, "Services for Youth Emancipating from Foster Care," Memorandum to Senator Barbara Boxer at 12 (2007).

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, www.census.gov

¹⁸ Id. See also "Returning to the Nest," *The Baltimore Sun*, February 29, 2004; "Boomerang Kids Keep Coming Home," *CBS Evening News*, January 9, 2004

¹⁹ Torrico, Roxana. "Child Welfare League of America Independent Living Coordinator Questionnaire Results," 2004, 1, available at www.cwla.org/prgrams/housing/housingreporty.pdf.

²⁰ Robert Schoeni & Karen Ross. *Family Support During the Transition to Adulthood*. National Poverty Center Policy Brief, 2004, available at www.npc.umich.edu/publications/policy_briefs/brief3/breif3.pdf

²¹ Roman, N.P. & Wolfe, N. (1995) *Web of Failure: The relationship between foster care and homelessness*. National Alliance to End Homelessness

²² See Congressional Research Service, "Services for Youth Emancipating from Foster Care," Memorandum to Senator Barbara Boxer at 12 (2007).

If we deny the contrasting and paradoxical expectations we have of foster youth versus non-foster youth, particularly those from middle and upper middle class backgrounds who remain at home and keep coming back well in to their 20s, we will never understand or properly address the housing crisis. It is indefensible to expect youth whose lives have been one rejection after another to leave their “home” of state custody permanently at age 18, or at age 21, if the lucky.

We have taken these young people from their family homes and attempted to “raise” them, only to throw them out on the street or worse upon discharge. We don’t adequately prepare them to live anywhere on their own, and then we release them without an ounce of support. Nothing could be more wrong. But while the youth are still in foster care and transitioning out, at least we know where they are, or we have the ability to find them, and we can therefore attempt to ameliorate the situation.

These 30,000 plus are young, they have their whole lives ahead of them; but if we don’t do something about this crisis now, they will slip through the cracks of society, with our own hands letting them go.