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**WRITTEN TESTIMONY ON HB 1302
Foster Care to Age 21**

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EARLY LEARNING & HUMAN SERVICES

Thursday, February 7, 2012. 8:00 a.m.

House Hearing Room C

John L. O'Brien Building

Good morning Madame Chair and members of the committee. My name is Patrick Dowd and I am with the Office of the Family & Children's Ombudsman ("OFCO"). While OFCO remains neutral on specific proposed legislation, we support the intent of this legislation to provide for foster care services to age 21 for youth who would otherwise age out of the foster care system.

Current state law addresses the needs of foster youth over the age of 18 who are pursuing secondary or post secondary education, but does not address the needs of foster youth not involved in these academic pursuits, and who may be in greater need of basic assistance.

This bill provides that upon turning 18, foster youth who are engaged in employment or participating in a program to promote employment would also be eligible to receive foster care services to age 21. For our own children, we support and encourage their career ambitions and provide basic assistance while they gain education and or work experience. We should provide equal support to our foster youth in pursuing their ambitions.

This bill also addresses the needs of the most vulnerable foster youths, those that are unable to engage in academic, vocational or employment pursuits and who will otherwise be without foster care services upon turning 18 years of age. The bill

allows youth to receive foster care services if they are incapable of engaging in academic or employment activities, because of a documented medical condition.

By providing the basic services to assist foster youth successfully transition into adulthood, we can help prevent negative outcomes for youth exiting foster care. For example, studies of youth who leave foster care without a safe, permanent family reveal over half of youth who aged out of foster care experienced one or more episodes of homelessness, and nearly 30 percent were incarcerated at some point.¹ Extended foster care to 21 will also help break the cycle of generational child abuse or neglect- where foster youth who aged out re-enter the child welfare system, this time as young parents.

OFCO is particularly troubled by complaints regarding a former foster youth, 18 years of age or older, who wants to re-enter foster care, but the dependency case has already been dismissed. As this bill is modified, I ask that you consider providing an avenue for youth in this situation to be able to re-enter foster care and receive needed services.

HB 1302 is essential to provide basic care and stability necessary for a foster youth transitioning into adulthood and will improve their chances for success. Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with our written testimony on this legislation

¹ *Fostering Connections, Analysis No. 1*, McCoy-Roth, Freundlich and Ross, Jan. 31, 2010. Available at: http://www.fosteringconnections.org/tools/assets/files/Connections_Agingout.pdf