Written Testimony of
Sonya Brown

In a hearing before

The United States Senate
Committee on the Judiciary

entitled

"National Foster Care Month: Supporting Youth in the Foster Care and Juvenile Justice Systems"

May 17, 2016

Contact: Sonya Brown, Boys Town Louisiana Alum
Sonya.Brown@boystown.com

Lisette Burton, Boys Town Director of National Advocacy
Lisette.Burton@boystown.org; 919-728-4182

Boys Town Washington D.C.
4801 Sargent Road Northeast
Washington, DC 20017 | 202-832-7343
http://www.boystown.org/quality-care

Saving Children, Healing Families®

Good morning, Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and members of the Committee. My name is Sonya Brown, and I'm from New Orleans, Louisiana. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you all today. I hope to give voice to the young people who are at the heart of this important conversation, because, as my story will illustrate, there is so much overlap between juvenile justice and child welfare that we must connect the two systems to help the most vulnerable kids. Before I was a self-sufficient adult, I was a girl involved with both the foster care and the juvenile justice systems and, at two different points, I was incarcerated. I am here to share my personal experiences – experiences that are all too common nationwide – along with my suggestions for how both systems can be more effective for young people.

My mother was schizophrenic and often violent. I can clearly remember the fear I felt when she had, what I now understand was, a psychotic episode. My father was also mentally ill and an alcoholic. Often there was no food in the house, and we frequently slept in emergency rooms and shelters. When I was six years old, after homelessness, neglect, and physical abuse, my siblings and I were placed into foster care and ultimately separated into different placements and homes across the city and state. Lucky for me, a volunteer attorney was appointed to represent me in family court, and he and his family still support me to this day. When I was seven years old, he told me to write a letter telling the court whether I wanted to go back to my mom. I remember getting a dictionary and looking up big words. Even as a small child, I knew this letter was important and I wanted to get it right, because I absolutely did not want to go back to live with my mom. It was an important moment for me, because it was the first time someone had asked me what I wanted; but unfortunately, for a long while, it was also the last time anyone asked me for input about my life.

I was initially happy to be in foster care – we had food every day and there was routine. What created the real trauma for me was being separated from my siblings, particularly my older sister who was my mother figure. She started running away from her placements first, and I wanted to run away to be with her. I was placed in seven different foster homes and ten different schools over the years. I was expelled from three different schools, and I had a tough time with other girls in the neighborhood. I never felt safe, and no one was listening. When I was 13, I got into a fight at school and was arrested. In front of everyone at school, I was handcuffed and taken away to

the Youth Study Center, which was jail for children, complete with bars on the doors. I was strip searched when I arrived. My older sister was already incarcerated at that point, and after I was detained, things got worse for me too. I was diverted from deeper involvement in the juvenile system through successful completion of Teen Court, but I was placed in an alternative school. I wasn't a tough kid by nature, but there were a lot of tough girls at that school, and at that point I started not to care.

I was placed at Boys Town's emergency shelter when I was 16 years old. During that time, I worked with staff to build skills, but I was still in crisis and had a hard time adjusting to the family-style environment. I ran away from Boys Town, too; but I finally became tired . . . tired of couch-surfing, tired of homelessness, and tired of all the things that come with living basically on the streets. I turned myself in to my social worker and requested to go back to Boys Town, where I finally started to find success and I felt comfortable and safe. Nevertheless, after a few months, my social worker transferred me again, this time to a new program hundreds of miles away from New Orleans. No surprise, I ran away from that program, and hitchhiked all the way back home.

It was my older sister who convinced me to stop running. By this time, she had entered into her own cycle of homelessness and incarceration. She told me I needed to do something different and not follow her path. I began living with a friend's mother who worked to become my licensed foster mother. I called my attorney. Out of the goodness of their hearts, my attorney and his wife paid for me to enroll in private school, and I finally settled down and started to do well. At 17, I was getting good grades, had friends, and was about to take the SATs when I was a passenger in a routine traffic stop.

When the officer collected everyone's ID, he found an outstanding warrant for my arrest due to running away the year before. The warrant had never been quashed. So for the second time in my life, I was handcuffed and taken away. Because 17 year-olds are treated as adults in Louisiana, this time I was taken to an adult correctional facility for women. I spent four terrifying days incarcerated for the status offense of running away, mingled with grown women who had committed actual crimes. I never saw a judge. There was no due process. When my attorney called my family court

judge at home, at night, on the fourth day, I was finally released. The arrest still appears on my record today although I was never charged with a crime.

Ultimately, I made it through because I had support. There are many different kinds of family, and my family became the people in different systems who were personally invested in me, provided me with structured support, listened to me, and gave me multiple chances, despite my actions. They remain lifelong connections, including Boys Town where I am now a social worker helping young people who are aging out of foster care.

To make systems work for children and families, we first have to acknowledge the existing challenges in how those systems function. National Foster Care Month is an appropriate time to recognize that as many as two-thirds of youth referred to juvenile courts have some level of involvement with the child welfare system.[1] That was me.

Studies have shown that dually-involved youth are more likely to be detained,[2] often because there is no parent in the courtroom to advocate for them. That was me.

The Valid Court Order exception permits youth to be incarcerated for status offenses like truancy or running away. This disproportionately affects foster youth and girls[3] – like it affected me.

Congress should reauthorize and fully fund the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA), because it supports prevention, early intervention, alternatives to incarceration, and it includes a grant program for girls in the juvenile justice system. The fact that 67% of state prison inmates do not have a high school diploma indicates that graduation from high school and attainment of advanced education are protective factors from involvement in the adult justice system. School success was a major turning point for me, and the JJDPA also includes provisions to help support educational opportunity for justice-involved youth.

---

[1] Halema, G. & Siegel, G. (2011). *Doorways to Delinquency: Multi-system Involvement of Delinquent Youth in King County (Seattle, WA)*. National Center for Juvenile Justice. Retrieved from http://www.ncjfcj.org/sites/default/files/Doorways_to_Delinquency_2011.pdf.

[2] Conger, D. & Ross, T. (2001). *Reducing the Foster Care Bias in Juvenile Detention Decisions: The Impact of Project Confirm*. Retrieved from http://www.vera.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/Foster_care_bias.pdf.

[3] Baynes-Dunning K. & Worthington K. (2013). *Responding to the needs of adolescent girls in foster care.* Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy, Winter, 2013, p. 322.

In addition to passing the JJDPA and listening to individual young people, I have three recommendations for Congress:

1. Encourage states to recognize and treat trauma across all systems that serve children. For that strategy to produce better outcomes, those systems have to communicate and collaborate;

2. With the high rates of crossover from foster care into the juvenile justice system, support interventions that help families effectively deal with mental illness and substance abuse so those families can hopefully stay safe and intact; and

3. For young people in the foster care system, encourage a continuum of effective services that provide the right care, in the right way, at the right time, for the right length of time so that foster youth can remain stable and supported in the foster home or placement that best meets their needs.

My story had a happy ending, and I'm thankfully here today, able to tell you that story. For too many young people, the outcomes are not so great. Thank you for doing what you can to change that. Thank you for listening. And thank you for prioritizing young people most in need of support.

Boys Town was founded in 1917 in Nebraska by Father Edward Flanagan. He was a leader in the movement to reform how abandoned and wayward children were treated in America, advocating for homes and education instead of the orphanages and workhouses that were typical during that time. Although our name is "Boys Town," we provide help, healing, and hope to both boys and girls and their families. Over the last 99 years, we have grown to directly serve almost half a million children per year in over 10 states and the District of Columbia. Our Integrated Continuum of Care® provides a range of evidence-informed services from prevention and early intervention through aftercare and family reunification. Between our Common Sense Parenting® classes, parenting and YourLifeYourVoice.org® websites, National Crisis Hotline, National Research Hospital, Well-Managed Classrooms and Schools training, and a variety of Youth and Family Care Services, ***Boys Town touches the lives of over 2 million Americans each year.***