

Testimony of Alexandra “Lexie” Morgan Gruber

United States Finance Committee Hearing

“No Place to Grow Up: How to Safely Reduce Reliance on Foster Care Group Homes”

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Thank you Chairman Hatch, Ranking Member Wyden, and Members of the Committee for the invitation to be here today. My name is Alexandra Morgan Gruber, but I prefer to be called Lexie. I am a graduate of Quinnipiac University and, most importantly, I am a foster youth. I am humbled and thankful for the opportunity to share with you my experiences living in foster care and group homes.

My story begins at the age of fifteen when the Connecticut Department of Children and Families removed me from my biological family. Although I am not comfortable sharing the events that necessitated my removal, I will say that my childhood was often distressing and chaotic. As a result, I suffered from severe anxiety and depression. When I entered foster care, I was traumatized from losing the only family and home I had ever known. I was also incredibly confused about the situation. My social worker and lawyer never explained to me why I was removed from my family. I felt like it was my fault. Overall, my entry into foster care served to exacerbate the symptoms of my post-traumatic stress disorder.

I believed that DCF was going to find me a loving family. At first, I was placed with my uncle. Being in a familiar and loving environment helped me begin to heal from both my stressful childhood and entry into foster care. Two months later, my social worker informed me that my relative's home did not have enough bedrooms to meet agency regulations and I would have to be removed from his home. A waiver could have been filed so I could remain in my uncle's home, but department policy carried more weight than permanency. My uncommitted social worker did not listen to my pleas to stay with my relative. Instead, she picked me up from his home and dropped me off at an emergency youth shelter. When I moved in, the staff watched as I struggled to carry trash bags filled with the few belongings I had left. I collapsed onto my new bed—a graffiti covered bed frame in a filthy room. I had lost everything, and now I was *homeless*.

The next two years were spent in a dizzying array of shelters and temporary foster care placements. Sometimes I would stay in a placement for months, and others I would stay for a single day. The instability in my life exacerbated the symptoms of my PTSD. My wellbeing deteriorated as a result of the often harmful, neglectful environments I lived in. After nearly two years of being bounced between placements, DCF attempted to reunify me with my biological family. I wanted to be with my family again, but the situation turned sour and I was quickly taken back into foster care. The failed reunification with my family left me feeling emotionally wounded, abandoned, and hopeless.

At this point, DCF decided to find a group home placement for me due to a lack of foster care placements and my depression. I was crushed to learn that there weren't any homes for me, as I desperately needed the love and support of a family as I came of age. I was even more hurt that I was being denied a family because of my PTSD. In many ways, the group home was made to feel like a punishment for my inability to control my unusually depressed behavior.

They placed me at Allison Gill Lodge, a therapeutic group home located in Manchester, Connecticut. When I walked through those doors on the first day, I felt like a wrongly accused prisoner walking into a jail to serve time for a crime they did not commit. My parents did not face any consequences for their actions and were still able to enjoy the familiar comforts of home. I was the only individual whose life was drastically altered as a result of my entry into foster care. The injustice of the situation was viscerally unsettling, and led to me experience deep anguish as I tried to comprehend why I was being punished for things outside of my control.

The group home looked more like a business than a home. The walls were adorned with informational posters like those in doctors' offices, rather than the familial photos and memorabilia that decorated my friends' houses. Outside the staff office on the second floor hung a whiteboard where the staff wrote down information, such as the weather and what was for dinner, instead of informing us of these things in person. Above an industrial hand- washing sink in the kitchen hung a licensing certificate from the municipal health department, making our kitchen look like a fast food restaurant. Health regulations prevented residents from preparing their own food or entering the fridge without gloves, and the cabinets were locked to prevent us from stealing snacks when the budget limited the availability of food. One of the reasons why I wanted to be granted home visits with my biological family was because I wanted to be able to make my own sandwich again.

The disciplinary system, known as a "level system", was also more militant than familial. It was a punitive system that granted us age-inappropriate privileges as long as we maintained absolutely perfect behavior. There were three levels. When you first entered the group home, you were on "individual phase." You only got about thirty minutes on the computer, one phone call to someone outside of your family, and couldn't be alone in a room without staff. Eventually, you could work your way up to the third phase, known as "community phase", if you maintained absolutely perfect behavior for an extensive period of time (if I remember correctly, it took me one year to attain this phase). On community phase, you could go for an hour walk by yourself. One of my fondest memories at the group home was being able to go for a walk to the cornerstone by myself and buy my favorite bag of chips with the meager allowance I earned. Those few sweet moments of silence allowed me to leave the drama of the group home and enjoy the peace of the outdoors. These privileges could be taken away in a single second. Any "bad behavior" such as swearing or talking back meant that you had every privilege taken away – no computer, no phone, and none of those precious few minutes outside by yourself. There was no consideration for normal teenage behavior, and we were punished for things that normal ten-year-olds would get away with in a family. These "privileges" were the only thing that kept me sane and I felt constantly on edge, afraid that my lifeline would be taken away at any moment. I could not understand why I had to act perfectly just to have the basic social privileges of a child. Why was I being penalized for having been removed from an abusive home?

In addition to these abnormal aspects of group-home life, my social life lacked any hint of normalcy. My high school years did not include the quintessential milestones

that so many of my peers got to experience. Extracurricular allowed me to spend more time outside of the group homes, but finding a ride was difficult as the Department of Children and Families needed a criminal background check on anyone who transported me. If I wanted to go to a friend's house, each member of my friend's family would have to undergo a criminal background check. It was hard enough to deal with the stigma of being a foster kid in suburban Connecticut, and I feared that my friends and their parents would think I was a delinquent if I told them they needed a background check so I could come for dinner. Making friends was pointless without being able to sustain the bond outside of the classroom, so I quit trying to make friends and built emotional walls.

Often, the group home residents were treated like second-class human beings. We were allotted two phone calls a day to friends on a pre-approved contact list and all phone numbers written down, presumably to be used to help them find a girl if she ran away. Social media was completely off limits. Every television show I watched and website I used was monitored by the staff, and they did not allow me to view anything age-appropriate.

Inside the home, I did not receive much emotional support or affection from the staff that served as my primary caregivers. The group home was staffed in rotating shifts of staff. Although the schedule was often solid, I never managed to remember who was coming in at what time or day. In hindsight, I realize that this was because it is abnormal for a young person to be cared for in this way and my brain simply could not process that information. The staff were often tired and on edge due to being overworked and underpaid. They tried their best, but they weren't supported in their roles and this was reflected in their interactions with residents. They would often remind us that they only put up with us for the paycheck and normalized the idea of being cared for in exchange for profit, which led some residents to engage in sex trafficking. Additionally, the staff were not allowed to show us physical affection. Hugs were absolutely off-limits and they would be fired if they said they cared about us in a non-professional way. During my entire two years in the group home, I was only told "I love you" one time. The staff pulled me aside and told me, and I burst out crying because I needed to hear that so badly. The lack of physical and verbal emotional support led all the residents, including myself, to seek out attention in the community in unhealthy ways. I didn't understand why I was taken from people who didn't love me only to be given to adults who could not care less about me.

The group home staffs were also ill equipped to diagnose and handle the symptoms of my post-traumatic stress disorder. From the very first day, they saw my unusual, depressed and erratic behavior as an internal, biological defect rather a series of perfectly normal coping mechanisms for my experiences. During my intake evaluation, the group home therapist told me that I could possibly go to a foster home if I "improved my behavior." They saw my erratic, depressed behavior as "acting out" when in reality I was a traumatized child trying to make sense of an irrational situation. The daily staff also failed to appropriately handle my outbursts. When I acted out, I was forced to sit alone on the stairs. The staff did not try to speak calmly to me to understand why I was acting out, and resorted to easy tactics like time-outs to correct my actions.

I was also forced to take a myriad of medication. Every week, residents of the group home had to attend a mandatory meeting with a psychiatrist. If we skipped this meeting, we would be put on “individual phase” and therefore I attended out of fear of losing my beloved, meager privileges. The doctor prescribed me a pill for every emotion I was experiencing. If I was moody during our visit, he’d give me a new prescription and claim that my behavior was due to mental illness rather than seeing moodiness as a normal teenage response to being forced to see a doctor. He also over-diagnosed me. If I did so much as swear during the meeting, he’d give me a label of Oppositional Defiance Disorder and give me a medicine to counteract the illness. At some points during my stay at the group home, I was so overmedicated that developed a tic in my face. Although I did not like the side effects of the medication, I had no choice but to take them. The staff administered the medicine and inspected under our tongues to make sure we swallowed. If we refused our medication, we would be put back on individual phase. The group home staff did not pay attention to my reactions to the medicine. In fact, the only person who kept an eye out was my biological mother. When she saw me repeatedly involuntarily scrunch my face during a home visit, she called the doctor and expressed concerns that I was overmedicated. Due to her watchful eye over the doctor, I was soon taken off that medicine and the doctor was more careful in the future. I still have a tic in my face as a result of that medication. If my mother did not speak up, I likely would have experienced more dangerous side effects of medication. When I left the group home, the long list of diagnoses given to me by the group-home doctor were dismissed and my depressive behavior was deemed a result of significant, complex childhood trauma.

Overall, I was at the group home for about one and a half years. During this time there was little to no effort to find me a permanent family. During my intake evaluation, the group home therapist told me that they would try to find me a family if I “improved my behavior”, as if this my stay at the group home was a trial for me to prove I was worthy of being loved. When they said “behavior” they were referring to my seemingly random fits of anger and sadness. These emotions were rooted in my belief that I was unlovable and were a result of the instability in my life. The staff and my social worker saw these behaviors as proof that I was unlovable and unworthy of a family.

I eventually left the group home in August 2011 to attend college. My transition from the group home to the dorm room was incredibly difficult. The staffs at the group home were the only adults I knew, but policy prohibited them from contacting me when I moved out. I was left with no dedicated adults to support me as I struggled to acclimate to a college campus. I spent my first semester in an incredibly dark depression, crying myself to sleep and struggling to focus in class. When the dorms closed, I had no home to return to. As a result of these challenges, I contemplated dropping out of college.

Today, I am a twenty-two year old woman living a healthy, happy life. I graduated from Quinnipiac University with honors this month, and am moving to DC soon for a job at First Focus as Director of Policy and Research. My post-traumatic stress disorder has been treated and I am now able to fully enjoy the sweetness of every

single moment. It is very difficult for me to talk about my experience in-group homes. To be truthful, I'd rather put it behind me and just enjoy the fact that my life is better now. But I cannot do that because I need to ensure that no other innocent child endures what I experienced.

I now know that I am loveable, valuable, and deserve a healthy family. It took four years of intensive therapy to allow me to reach this conclusion. However, my experiences in-group homes left me with emotional and physical scars that may never heal. I often have nightmares of being back in a group home, unable to leave and confused about why I am there. I wake up in cold sweats, scared that I will lose all the blessings in my life and have my autonomy taken away again. Relationships are still difficult for me, and I struggle to connect with others. Many people say I am successful and perhaps this is true if we are discussing my career. But I want to emphasize that as a result of living in this group home, I struggle to live a life of healthy connections and balance.

If someone were to ask me what group homes are like, I would tell him or her that group homes are modern-day orphanages. These institutions cannot provide the moral, ethical, or social learning that is essential to healthy childhood development. Every child deserves a family. When we remove children from unhealthy families, we make a promise to provide them with a healthier family that can nurture and support them. This is a promise that we must uphold. There is a series of data that shows that young people are being placed in these settings without good reason and are left for far too long. Additionally, a wide body of national literature demonstrates that youth in-group homes face poor outcomes once they age out of foster care.

The economic and social implications for these emerging adult's wellbeing are significant and affect the entire nation. The moral implications also force us to ask whether our country should allow vulnerable young people to live in placements that are detrimental to their own wellbeing and that of the surrounding community. If the answer to that question is "no" then we must work quickly to ensure that government policies, such as those that govern group homes, align with our nations values.