

Testimony of Ms. Brittany Dixon

Before the United States Senate

Subcommittee on Appropriations for Transportation, Housing and Urban Development and Related Agencies

Hello. My name is Brittany Dixon. Thank you for the opportunity to come to Washington and share my experiences before the U.S. Senate. I come from a lower middle class family in Auburn, Maine. In no way would I ever say that my life has been terrible, but throughout my life, there was a lot of family conflict and instability. My story shows that homelessness can happen to anyone.

During the summer after my senior year in high school, I found myself in a situation with nowhere to go. After a final dispute with my mother, she told me to leave and made me homeless at the age of 18. I couch surfed with friends and family, moving from place to place for over a month. Sometimes I didn't know where my next place to stay would be or for how long I would be welcome.

Nothing can prepare a teenager for the overwhelming and frightening feelings of being alone and having nowhere to go and no one to turn to after losing the sense of safety and security that having a place to call home can provide.

I didn't know where to turn but eventually through friends and a domestic violence help line, Safe Voices, I was connected to New Beginnings. For those of you who don't know, New Beginnings is a non-profit organization that provides emergency services and transitional living programs for youth throughout the state of Maine. Through the support of HUD and other programs like the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, they have worked to improve the lives of homeless youth and families in crisis for over 35 years. During the time that I stayed there I worked with adults who helped me know I deserved to feel safe and could work toward my personal goals of being a teacher.

After several interviews, New Beginnings found me a place in their transitional living program in Lewiston, Maine. It was great living there. New Beginnings provided many resources I could use to succeed, including assistance with college applications and financial aid. I also worked with my case manager to learn to use public transportation, to get to and from work, to access affordable food, to get health insurance through MaineCare, to practice lots of job skills, to find bargains, save money and use a budget, to pay rent on time and to take care of my apartment. While staying at New Beginnings transitional housing, my rent was supported by Section 8. New Beginnings has helped me to develop critical life skills and to become self-sufficient. I have even learned how to bake which I wasn't able to do growing up. I never knew how much fun baking can be.

The biggest help New Beginnings was able to provide was with my self-esteem. When I first entered the program, it seemed like I was apologizing every ten seconds or so because I thought everything was

my fault. I was super thankful that I had been accepted into their program, but at the same time I felt like I was burdening everyone around me. I worked very hard with my case worker to get to the root of why I felt the way I did and discovered that I wasn't a burden and that I was only responsible for what I could control. We discussed my problems and I learned to use more confident communication and interpersonal skills to improve relationships in my life with both friends and family. I learned to be much more confident making decisions for myself. There is no way I would be where I am now without the help of New Beginnings.

I stayed in the program for a year and a half, and after attending Central Maine Community College, I was accepted to the University of Maine Farmington and graduated with a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education in 2013. During three years of my college time I did work study to help support myself and my college expenses. I really appreciated that New Beginnings supported my decision to focus on education to work toward my career. I now work full time as an Educational Technician for Washburn Elementary School in Auburn and am planning to become a kindergarten teacher as soon as a position opens. I no longer need help with rental assistance because I can afford to live in my own apartment.

Programs that support homeless youth are important to so many young people like me. It gives young people the chance to have a safe place to stay while they get their footing and figure out what they want to do in their lives. It is important for every youth who faces homelessness to have funding for transitional and temporary programs that help them learn, be supported and have a safe place to stay. I didn't need to be supported forever, only until I could move to the next level for myself. Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience and for supporting programs like these.