Written Testimony of
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In a hearing before

The United States House of Representatives
Committee on Education and the Workforce

entitled

"Reviewing the Juvenile Justice System and How It Serves At-Risk Youth"

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BOYS TOWN.

Good morning, Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Scott, and members of the Committee. My name is Sloane Baxter, and I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you all today. I am 22 years old, and I'm here to share my personal experiences with the juvenile justice system and what did and did not work to help me cope with difficult circumstances, improve my social skills, and make better decisions for my life.

I was the at-risk youth we are here to talk about today. Like a lot of other young people who find themselves involved with the juvenile justice system, my family and I had challenges. Preparing for this hearing really made me think about how and when things went wrong for me. My parents did the best they could, and we have repaired our relationship now, but both my mom and my dad had drinking problems when I was young. I think I first realized things were off when I was around 8 years old, but by the time I was 11 or 12, I had become used to taking care of myself and doing what I wanted to do without much supervision.

At school things were up and down for me. I have ADHD and teachers didn't always know how best to help me. At home, I started staying out late and hanging out with older guys. By the time my parents realized the path I was on and tried to correct me, I didn't want to hear it. What bothered me was it felt like everyone expected *me* to change because I was the child. They would ask me, "Why is it so hard to come in when the street lights are on or just do the right thing?" But in my mind, I was thinking, "Why is it so hard for you to stop drinking or be there when I need you?"

I started getting in serious trouble at 14 years-old. My parents had separated, and I was living in North Carolina, but I came back to DC to visit my dad. We got into an argument late one night. My dad was intoxicated and I had been drinking as well. After that argument, I left the house and intended to go hang out with friends on the Southeast side. Since I lived on the Northeast side, I decided to get there by trying to steal a car – only I had no idea what I was doing. I had never done anything like that before. I grabbed a brick, threw it through a car window, tried unsuccessfully to start the car with a screwdriver, and when I walked away, I was quickly arrested by the police.

Breaking that window, trying to steal that car at 14, that was a cry for help and an effort to control things out of my control – I know that now. I was detained at the Youth Services Center (YSC). At court, I was placed on probation, and I didn't comply with the terms of my probation. Remember, I was used to doing what I wanted to do, and nothing else around me had changed. Even though I continued to miss curfew, continued to drink alcohol, and occasionally smoked marijuana, there was no positive intervention with me at that point. Probation *monitored* me, but didn't do anything to *help* me.

I was ultimately committed to the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS). I hadn't picked up any new charges, and I wasn't violent or even outwardly destructive, but my dad agreed with my probation officer that commitment was the only way to deal with me. Despite a low risk level to the community, I spent most of the next year locked up at YSC and then the Oak Hill Detention Center, which was youth prison. DC has a new juvenile facility now, but Oak Hill, where I was sent, was a horrible place. It was a compound with barbed wire. Kids would fight each other, fight guards, no one felt safe. The expectation was that youth would do whatever they wanted to do, and so that's what would happen. It was the last stop as a juvenile, before out-of-state residential programs or adult jail. I was fortunate to only spend about two months at Oak Hill before getting referred to Boys Town, a community-based, therapeutic residential program.

I was 15 years old when staff from Boys Town came out to Oak Hill to interview me. I was depressed, I didn't really want to talk to anyone, but I've been told that when the staff mentioned that there were little kids in the home where I would go, I lit up. It didn't sound like a typical group home.

I didn't know what to expect, but when I arrived it was so different from the institutional, locked facilities where I had been. It was the first place that I went where I felt like the people actually cared about what they did. It was a positive and not a hostile environment, staffed by a trained married couple and support staff, where the expectations to learn and succeed were clear. I lived with my Family Teachers, Payton

and Yadelska Wynne, who became like a second set of parents to me. When I arrived, they had their own small children, so I was immediately placed in a situation where I wanted to role model for someone else. It was a family-oriented atmosphere and there were plenty of people to help me, including assistant family teachers, kind of like aunts and uncles, along with my peers.

At Boys Town, I had individualized care. I was one of six guys in the house, but we each had our own goals and things to work on. I didn't know what my leadership potential was before I was exposed to different things at Boys Town, like "self-government" at family meetings and shoveling snow for elderly neighbors in the community, not because it was court ordered, but because it was the right thing to do. While at Boys Town, they recognized, and I finally admitted, that I was self-medicating and had a drug and alcohol problem. I went to rehab, and then went back to finish the program at Boys Town. Through the good times and the bad, Boys Town was there persistently supporting me and my family. Having people who believed in me unlocked a whole new way of life.

As I got better, I was actually able to help other guys in the house, and we were a positive influence on each other. Together, we had the opportunity to participate in a summer program called "The Beat Within," where we published a book of poetry called Concrete Dreams with the help of author Kwame Alexander. I was enrolled in the Chelsea School, and it was finally a school that worked for me. They partnered with Boys Town and my family, and could accommodate my IEP. With all the skills I learned at Boys Town, I became a peer mediator at school, and I graduated successfully in 2012.

Life still presents difficult circumstances, but now I have the skills to handle those situations as they come, and a big picture I keep in mind when making decisions. I made mistakes, but I learned from them. I didn't learn anything positive locked up at YSC or Oak Hill, but at Boys Town I learned all kinds of skills that I still use today with my family and on my job. I have been employed with the same major corporation as a coffee barista for 4 years, and I run my own home improvement small business. I'm

self-reliant. I have a better relationship with my parents. We still have our times now and then like any family, but the difference is now I know how to communicate. My dad and I have had a lot of struggles, but now I can actually tell him that I love him. I haven't been re-arrested, and I won't be. I have a different vision and possibility for my life than I did when I was younger.

Everything doesn't work for everybody, but all youth want to do something positive with their lives and are looking for consistency and structure – whether we can express it correctly or not. Boys Town was the program that helped me, and so many others just like me, turn our lives around; but I'm not any different from other kids who find themselves in trouble with the law. The difference is that someone didn't just lock me away and give up on me. Instead, I got help and support in my community, and I was able to make changes for the long-term.

I think Congress should reauthorize the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act and fully fund the community-based, life-changing programs the Act supports. With more options for early intervention and prevention, perhaps we can help the 14 year-old kids who are out there now, just like I was, avoid the system altogether. In my opinion, that should be the priority in addressing national criminal justice reform, because too often juvenile offenders become adult criminals. I know that this is Youth Justice Awareness Month, so I'm glad to be here today, able to share my story. If you want to know what works, talking and listening to individual young people is the first step.

I told my cousin what I was doing today, and he said just making an appearance and telling my story could make a difference. Even if you have heard stories like mine before, he said I should still tell you, because maybe it might impact you in a new way today.

I easily could have become a statistic, and instead I'm a tax paying, contributing member of society. There is that same possibility in every other young person, as long as you, me, all of us are willing to *not* give up on them before they even really get to start.

Thank you.

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 98 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 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.***