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Testimony in Support of House Bill 594 to Establish an Illinois Legislative Youth Advisory Council

*Submitted by Kiara Jackson, Youth Policy Advocate, Start to Finish Coalition
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Good afternoon, my name is Kiara Jackson and I am the Youth Policy Advocate managing the Start to Finish Coalition at Children's Home & Aid. The Start to Finish Coalition is an advocacy coalition focused on the needs of youth and young adults, ages 8-25, and believes youth can and will thrive if they are **stable, safe, healthy, educated, employable and connected**. These six factors are the cornerstone for the ways in which we promote activities, funding, and research that guide youth through school and into young adulthood with the skills, education, and agency to build exceptional lives.

The Start to Finish Coalition is incredibly thankful to Representative Kifowit and her district Youth Advisory Council for granting us the opportunity to meet and discuss HB 594 and changes to the bill. HB 594 provides youth a voice in state government regarding the issues, interests, and needs important to them. Youth and their families are experts in their own lives and what works best for them; thus, it is important that space is intentionally created to manifest this notion. They should be able to receive a practical application of civics and activism, explore different career fields that make policy and advocacy professions tangible, and gain education enrichment. When decisions are being made regarding youth, youth voices should be present in those decision-making spaces.

During our meeting with Representative Kifowit and her Youth Advisory Council, the Start to Finish Coalition provided suggestions that focused on inclusivity and compensation. We discussed ensuring that youth council members are reflective of Illinois' racial and gender diversity, compensating youth as council members, and adding an additional duty to advise the Youth Budget Commission as the Commission fulfills their responsibilities. These changes would bring youth voices, generally, and youth voices that are not always heard from, to the forefront of decision-making. Broadening the applicant qualifications beyond high school and college students grants the Council diverse perspectives that cannot be captured from educational experience alone. Compensating youth for providing their intellect and emotional labor is crucial and it also gives youth, who may be experiencing financial burden due to extenuating circumstances, a chance to engage and participate on the Council. We are looking forward to working with Representative Kifowit and her council members on incorporating these ideas.

Establishing a Youth Advisory Council also provides an opportunity for collaboration and partnership with the Youth Budget Commission. The Commission was appointed by Governor Pritzker in 2019 to oversee the development of the Fiscal Scan of Illinois Public Investments in Children and Youth, Ages 8-25 and utilize it to make recommendations regarding policy solutions and other investments in youth and young adults ages 8-25. By advising the Youth Budget Commission, the Youth Advisory Council described in HB 594 would provide a much-needed youth voice in the Commission's work and could lead to youth-inspired and youth-championed recommendations to ensure young people enter adulthood as self-sufficient adults who lead exceptional lives.

We are excited to work with the sponsor of HB 594 to help include changes that will make the opportunity presented in this bill accessible to all Illinois youth.

Thank you for your time and your efforts for the well-being of youth and young adults. If you have questions, please contact Kiara Jackson, Youth Policy Advocate, at kijackson@childrenshomeandaid.org for more information.