

TESTIMONY OF
TIFFANY RIVERA
YOUNG WOMAN FORMERLY DETAINED IN THE
JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

**SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING
GIRLS IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM:
STRATEGIES TO HELP GIRLS ACHIEVE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL**

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME, TERRORISM, AND HOMELAND SECURITY
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GIRLS EDUCATION AND MENTORING SERVICES

My name is Tiffany Rivera, I'm 19 years old and I'm currently an outreach worker at GEMS. Growing up my mom and dad were addicted to drugs. My dad use to beat on my mom and all of her kids. My dad went to jail when I was a little girl and my mom was left alone to raise her 6 kids. I remember my mom always bouncing me from home to home. When I was 7 years old I lived with my godmother for 2 years. Out of those two years I was raped by my god brother. When I was 9 years old I remember telling my mother I didn't want to live there anymore, so she sent me to live with my aunt in Long Island. I stayed there until I was 11 years old because my aunt told me she felt that my mother wasn't going to be around much longer. My mother was very sick. Even though at this point she had stopped smoking cigarettes and using heroin, she was dealing with the after affects of using it for so many years. When I was 12 years old my mother was hit by a car and passed away.

Once my mother passed away I started running away and got involved with the streets. I was a victim of CSEC (commercial sexual exploitation of children), I got involved with gangs and smoked weed. I was put in a mental institution at 14 years old. Once I was released, I went back to the streets because I did not receive real help or counseling at the hospital--all they did was put me on medication. Right after my 15th birthday, I was jumped by two 21 year old girls and 4 men. I stabbed one of the girls in self defense. I was arrested 3 days later. I was locked up in the Juvenile Justice System for close to 2 years.

While being in detention I had over a dozen fights. I was jumped and assaulted by other residents and I can remember the staff turning their backs on me and acting as if nothing happened. If you were in there for prostitution or your family history was written down in your file, the counselors used to put your business on blast—confidentiality was never kept. If you had a STD (sexually transmitted disease) or something they would talk and spread your information with other girls in there. If they didn't like you they would lie to another girl so that you can get beat up. There was always favoritism. I remember being sick a few times and putting in a sick call but never being called for it. They would always wait until you needed to go to the hospital before seeing you. When I first got arrested I was kind of happy because I felt as if I was being saved, I was hoping to receive help and start dealing with my problems. But it was as if they completely ignored that part. I had asked to see a counselor and they told me ok --- it took 3 months for me to see one! It was never consistent, and it didn't help, all we did was play games. I felt as if they made us keep our problems inside—it didn't seem like they really wanted to know the true story- the real issues that I had been dealing with my whole life-- they just made me take 3 different medications and told me I was just an angry girl. There were times when we had a good time like when they had special performances for us to do during the holidays, but those times didn't fill the void of being in detention with no one there to really care about me or ask about how I was really dealing with issues of loss, abuse and trauma.

While being in detention I met GEMS through their outreach workers and they referred me to the program. I was released on 5 years probation and to GEMS independent living home. GEMS has helped me finish school, they helped me deal with family issues and the closure of it not being my fault. I remember coming to GEMS and hoping things weren't like detention. I wanted to see a real counselor and just stay away from the streets. GEMS asked me what I wanted from them and my goals. I told them and they set up a safety plan with me and ways to meet my goals. They worked with me to make sure I met my goals. After I met my goals it felt like a relief and that things can change and get better in my life.

GEMS was always there when I needed them, when I was in trouble or just needed someone to vent to. They never judged me or turned their backs on me; and they helped me feel at home. I was able to grow up and deal with my problems. I understand life and the bigger picture now. I was able to further my passion in helping others and giving back. They gave me the opportunity with a job as an outreach worker. Now I go to juvenile detention centers, schools, child welfare and other programs to talk to young girls. They have helped me with permanent housing. Although I am currently still on probation my life has changed and I've done a 180. I can finally say I'm happy with the way things are going in my life and am okay with what has happened in my past. I know I've learned so much from my past and can use my experiences to help other young women who may be going through sometime similar.

When I go to detention centers I see the same patterns happening over and over again. I see staff actually gossiping about girls right in front of them. It makes me upset because I know it's not cool and that it can make a girl want to shut down completely and when someone who is truly trying to help her she refuses the help. When I sit and talk to these girls. I let them know that I will not turn my backs on them and I will always listen and give them the best advice I can. If I have resources that can help them I make sure to give it to them. I build a bond of trust between the young ladies and myself. Sometimes the girls just want someone to talk to and I make sure I can be that person. I tell them that if they want someone to write to they can write me and will make sure to write them back. We have a pen pal program at GEMS to help the girls in detention know that there are people out here who care about them and want to see them succeed and heal.

I hope to see better, more caring staff at these detentions that are well trained. I hope to see that these girls receive services that they deserve and that best help them deal with their problems; whether its being a rape victim, a gang member, a drug abuser or a victim of commercial sexual exploitation. I hope they get to see better therapists with more consistency. Most of all, I hope that the adults who are responsible for this will listen to my testimony and work to make the essential changes to help our troubled and often neglected youth.