

Testimony of Brandon Dunlap
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Good morning. Thank you for giving me the chance to testify today in support of H.R. 32. My name is Brandon Dunlap and I am 25 years old and I am from Chicago, Illinois. I currently work in the Food and Beverage Department of the Union League Club of Chicago. I graduated from Kendall College in Chicago in 2010 with a bachelor degree in hospitality management and an associate degree in culinary arts. I am a graduate of Curie High School in Chicago. I am proud of what I have accomplished so far but it has been very difficult because I have not had a stable housing situation growing up. A safe and secure place to live would have helped me in many ways.

For most of my childhood, I have not had a stable place to live. My parents got separated when I was young. After they split up, my mom, my sister and I ended up living with my aunt and five cousins. It was crowded and we were hungry a lot. I remember that it was hard to do my homework. It was distracting and difficult to focus because there were so many people in the house. Since then, things came together and fell apart on more than one occasion.

My mom got an apartment when I was entering the 4th grade. We lived there for about a year or so when we were evicted. My mom, sister and I split up. My sister lived with my aunt while I lived with neighbors the summer going into 5th grade. That was a tough summer for me. My caregivers' old age limited their ability to take care of me; they let me out to play as early as 7am and didn't worry about me until around 6pm, when their day was winding down. After that summer, I moved in with my aunt where my sister was, and her five children. My mom was in and out of the apartment and did not always stay with us. Eventually, my mom got another apartment but again lost the apartment. After this apartment loss, I lived with a close friend I call my sister. I was best friends with her little brother in 7th and 8th grade and ate at their house regularly.

One cold winter night during my sophomore year, after work, my mom called me and asked if we were still meeting up, as we previously planned. I told her I was really tired and requested we meet another time but she insisted on us meeting up. I got on the bus and we met on 71st and Prairie. We walked up to an apartment and she opened the door and said welcome home. She said she got this apartment for me and I was relieved. Relieved to have a place to call home after such a long time and relieved I didn't have to get back on the bus on that cold wintery night. I believe we lived there only until the following summer. That summer during my junior year, I received a phone call, just before work, from my sister, stating that the sheriff was there to put our things out on the street. My mother was nowhere to be found. I went to work and told my manager what was going on and he lent me his car to save anything I

could. My sister went to another cousin's place and I went to work, with tears in my eyes, not knowing for the first time where I was going for the night. The tears wouldn't stop so my manager offered for me to go home. The tears came even stronger than I thought possible because I HAD NO HOME TO GO TO.

Right after my sister called me, I had called my cousin to inform him of the situation and he suggested I go to work and figure things out later. After one of the longest shifts I ever worked, my cousin showed up at my job and relieved my worries and said I could stay with him.

However, he didn't allow me to have a key to come and go as I please. This proved to be very difficult for me. My cousin, a young man in his mid-twenties, wanted to live his life. Some nights, my cousin wouldn't be home after I left work. I would not find out that he was not there until I arrived there after taking public transportation. I would travel a long distance from work or school, often in bad weather, only to find that my cousin was not home and I needed to try to find someplace else to stay that night. When my cousin wasn't home, I'd scramble to call different friends and family members to find a place to stay for the night and then get back on the bus to travel a long distance to another place to stay. On one occasion, I called my grandmother and thought I was welcome to stay there. Once I arrived there, she seemed upset about many things. My uncle, her brother, had just moved in with her due to some circumstances I know nothing about. She started venting about how people will not just move in on her so I decided to leave and stay with my aunt that night.

From that night on, I developed a rotation theory in which I would utilize all my resources to try to avoid staying in the same place two nights in a row, unless it was my cousin's place. I was always aware that I didn't want to be a burden on anyone, including my cousin. I could pick up on a situation where people were not happy with my being there and felt the need to constantly diversify my living situation to avoid being a burden. Figuring out where I would stay each night and travelling to get there took a lot of my time and energy. I had to be strategic about where I would stay night to night. I had to have a plan, then a back up plan, and then more plans, in case the back up plan did not work out.

Staying with my cousin was not a good situation. I slept on the floor under the pool table. There really wasn't room for me to stay there. I was uncomfortable and did not sleep well. That had its effects the next day when I would be tired and find it hard to focus at school. Nobody was making sure that I got up and went to school. My cousin left the house early for work. I recognized the click-clack of his shoes and knew it was time to get up. My cousin lived in the Beverly neighborhood of Chicago on the south side and my school was far away, near Midway Airport.

After I graduated high school, I finally got stable housing. Two weeks after graduation, I moved into student housing in downtown Chicago with Kendall College's Culinary Camp under special circumstances. I remember taking the train to move all of my stuff in and being so happy to have a place of my own. I had a stable environment, I was comfortable and I had my own place to be. It was home to me and I was the only high school graduate in the program so they allowed me to work and live a somewhat normal life. In the fall, I started at Kendall College and my dorm room was my stable housing. It was such a stress-reliever to know that I had my dorm to go to each night to sleep and study.

My unstable living situation had many negative effects on me. The first was academics. Academics wasn't easy outside of school, and, in a lot of ways, it would've been so much easier to drop out. I only went because if I was anywhere else at the time, the police would want to contact my parents and I didn't want that extra drama for me or them. Doing homework was tough for me and there was no one to push me to study and that made the situation worse. I skated through high school doing mostly class work and participation, minimal studying and sometimes last minute extra credit at semester ends. Doing homework and studying was also a very difficult task for me due to the lack of consistent, stable environment. Books were heavy and trips were long. The time and energy that it took for me to figure out where to sleep each night left little time for homework. I struggled because I never developed good study habits as a child. It was really hard to study throughout my life because of my living situation. I feel that I was only an average student because of my lack of a stable environment and not having good study skills. In college, I did two programs. The culinary program was based on performance and punctuality and I did well in that program. The B.A. program required more reading, studying and bookwork and I struggled with that part of the program.

In high school, I couldn't do things that other kids did like sports and extracurricular activities. I couldn't take part in that because I had other responsibilities. I went to school, I worked at Subway throughout high school and I spent time trying to find a place to stay each night. I was forced to grow up fast. I only dreamed of having a stable home and family. It was really lonely. I wasn't able to develop socially in high school and I still have anxieties about social situations. In adolescence, I developed a shyness for fear of not being accepted. As an adult, that shyness has almost, completely reversed. It made me develop trust issues with mostly everyone.

One person I met through my high school's culinary program helped me a lot. Her name is Rhonda Purwin. Rhonda always showed genuine care for me. She helped me with competitions, writing essays, getting scholarships, getting into culinary camp and college. However, she was not able to help me with my housing situation.

I have faced many barriers to housing in my life. As a child, my mother was not able to afford and maintain stable housing for my sister and I. If she had some assistance – a housing program with services, things would have been much better for us. My mom had issues she needed help with but if she had stable housing with services, she may have been able to address those issues. If such a program had been available to my family, my years of homelessness could have been prevented. After I was on my own in high school, I also had many barriers to housing. Even though I worked throughout high school, there was no way I could afford my own housing, or find someone to rent an apartment to a teenager. Although people at school helped me with other things, nobody was able to help with my housing situation. I would have loved someplace that was safe, warm and consistent to live – a healthy place to live my life, go to school, work and go to one place to do my homework and eat. A consistent place to stay with a caring adult would have been wonderful. It would have saved me lots of energy that I could have put toward school. That is something that was never available to me.

It would have been very difficult for me to verify my living situation when I was growing up. As a homeless youth, I would not want to ask for proof from an adult that I could stay with them for only 14

days. To ask for proof that an adult allowed me to live with them for only 14 days would possibly cause some adults to feel guilty to put in writing that a homeless child could only stay for 14 days, or worry that they could be in some trouble. Being in that situation, 14 days is a really long time. I would have accomplished a lot if I could stay in one consistent place for 2 weeks. My philosophy was to not stay in one particular place for more than a couple of days at most. The reasoning for this was not to overstay my welcome. I didn't want anyone that was helping me to get tired of my presence. Asking them for verification would be another burden to them.

For the same reasons, I would not feel comfortable asking them to sign off on a piece of paper stating that I had moved twice within 60 days. Most people know only what I told them about my living situation and didn't keep track of days and numbers of moves so they would not be able to verify how many times I had moved within 60 days. Also, family members would be reluctant to put something in writing that might show that my parents were not caring for me. I also didn't want to risk doing anything that might involve any authorities because I didn't want DCFS to go after my parents. If, in order to access housing services, I had to show that I would likely be homeless for a long time, that would be difficult for me. I always hoped that I would not be homeless for too long. I also don't know how I would have proven that I'd likely be homeless for a long time.

I believe that all government agencies should recognize the situation that I lived in as homeless. I did not have a home or a stable place to stay. I did not know where I was going to sleep from night to night. Schools are important to identifying students who are homeless because they see the students the most and have the most information. If a school determines a child is homeless, they should be able to help the child find a housing program that will help them. All government agencies should provide adequate assistance to children who, like me, live place to place. The government agencies should know what a child needs and provide that – especially a safe, stable place to live.

When I was homeless, it was like steering a ship in a storm on the open ocean. I hoped the waters didn't throw anything at me I couldn't handle. I was the only one on the ship, steering it and all the crew members were offshore trying to assist a lost person at sea. Above all else, this situation has forced me to look to myself for success. It was my decision all the way through and I, with minimal guidance, made it through. I learned how to quickly evaluate and eliminate a problem for the longest temporary solution I could find. I developed a great appreciation for what others did for me and I'll hold that characteristic as long as I live.

However, I hope that other young people do not have to go through what I went through. I hope that the situation of young people who are staying temporarily with friends and family are considered homeless by all government agencies and given assistance with a stable place to live.

