

Maria, a pregnant 18-year-old African American female, lives in Sasha Bruce Youthwork's Grace House while caring for her 3-year-old son.

Maria lived with her mother and two younger siblings until she was 15. Her father was incarcerated by the DC justice system. At age 15, she got pregnant with her son, and “everything changed...” Her mother kicked her out, and she went to live with her grandmother in hopes of raising her son in a loving home. Her grandmother and her had a strong bond before moving in, yet began “butting heads” with her after developing postpartum depression. Her grandmother was particular about how she wanted to maintain her home, but Maria found it difficult to keep up with her demands due to her depression. At this time, she started arguing with her grandmother frequently. Their arguments led to her grandmother occasionally kicking her out and once, even calling the police on her. After some time, she stayed over at her great-grandmother’s house for a week, but could not stay for long as it was a public housing facility. Realizing that this wasn’t sustainable, she reached out to her Aunt to help her find a better housing solution.

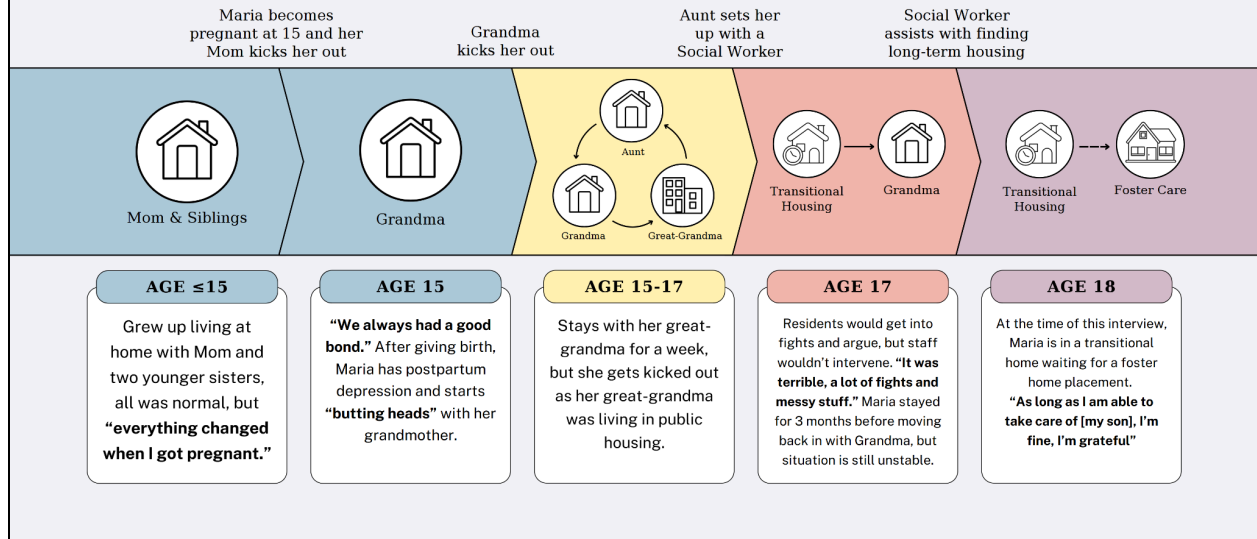
At age 17, she first encountered the foster care system via the “Healthy Babies” program, a transitional, temporary housing that she stayed at for 3 months. Maria expresses how her aunt helped her get into the program, but, “it was terrible, [there were] a lot of fights.” She claims the staff were disorganized and did not intervene during such arguments between the residents, including when Maria experienced blatant racism. She and her aunt realized the program was not matching her needs, and Maria went back to live with her grandmother while her Aunt helped to find her a social worker to handle her case. At age 18, she became pregnant again and the social worker matched Maria to the Grace House program. She is enjoying the program, and is comfortable with her experiences so far at Grace House

Maria talked about facing issues with her mental health, especially with her anxiety. She explained that she has high levels of social anxiety, expressing that “[her] anxiety only bothers [her] when [she is] in a new environment.” These struggles were prevalent in her housing struggles between ages 15-17, as she was cycling between her grandmother, great-grandmother’s, and aunt’s houses while raising her son. She used to receive SNAP benefits when she lived with her grandmother. She is now trying to apply for these benefits, but is stuck due to procedural issues, as her grandmother is withholding her social security number from her, which she needs to get a driver’s license. She also is unable to receive DC’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits as she is a part of the foster care system. Maria is currently working with her social worker to receive long-term housing as reunification is no longer an option.

Maria expressed her desire to earn multiple degrees, start a career, and eventually become successful in her endeavors. She wants to build herself up step-by-step and sees herself working in 5-10 years while being “the best mom [she] can be for [her son] and the baby [she is] having.” She mentioned how she would like to see D.C programs provide more programs for youth under 18, especially for those that are pregnant or nursing. She asserted that since some teens are not ready to care for a child on their own and do not have other resources, they need help. She also stated that group homes and services should be catered more toward individuals with long-term plans as short-term fixes are ineffective. She is appreciative of Sasha Bruce Youthwork’s support in providing her with her needs. “As long as I am able to take care of [my son], I’m fine, I’m grateful,” she explained.

Figure: Maria's pathway through homelessness

Maria African American
 Age 18 Straight
 Female From D.C.



The following account was recorded and documented with the consent of the participant, whose name has been changed for the purposes of this project. The participant, Nathan, was informed of the educational intentions of this interview and was provided with contact information for follow-up if he would like to inquire further or revoke his consent at a future date.

Nathan is a 24 year-old cisgender male who had multiple encounters with the foster care system, the juvenile justice system, and Sasha Bruce Youthwork in his youth. He now works overnight shifts at Sasha Bruce's Allen House.

Nathan lived with his mother and younger sister until he was five years old. He says that his mother was working through a heavy depression during these years, and that they “lost everything” when he was five. They were unable to continue living in their house and began couch surfing between friends and relatives, which often meant that his sister would be sleeping on the floor. His sister’s father, who he believed to be his own biological father at the time, eventually called Child Protective Services, who removed the children from his mother’s custody and placed them in the care of his sister’s father. He says he will never forget that day and how difficult it was, including how hard his mother fought CPS to not have to hand her children over.

His sister’s father’s partner was callous towards the children, often refusing to acknowledge them or neglecting their needs. He felt like he had to shelter his sister from their new harsh realities, and recounts that that was a lot of responsibility to shoulder at his young age. He was only allowed to see his mother intermittently at this time. After a few months, he and his sister moved in with his grandmother. This time was described as a learning experience for him, and he says that his grandmother taught him a lot. He felt that other family members looked down on him, however, implying that the situations he was in were his fault and that made him feel worthless. These interactions made him feel neglected, and he opted to run away from home at 13.

Nathan spent a month on the streets after he ran away from home. He did not keep in touch with his grandmother at the time, and would sleep in alleys and open cemeteries, often scavenging through the trash for food. He said that the streets felt safer to him than his home environment. He eventually returned to his grandmother’s house to retrieve some of his belongings and was caught by the police, as he had been reported as a missing person. D.C. often utilizes the justice system to intervene on youth runaways, and as such, Nathan entered the juvenile justice system. He says that none of his family members attended court proceedings in order to claim him. He says that his two years in the juvenile justice system were extremely difficult and that they took away his innocence. He completely lost control and felt that he had no ownership of his life or personhood, like an animal. He had consistent issues with his Guardian ad Litem misrepresenting his wishes in court, and he was only allowed to have his mother visit for one hour at a time.

He left the juvenile detention center at 15 to enter Sasha Bruce Youthwork for between 1.5-2 years. He was still required to wear a GPS tracking device. He says that he had a mentor at

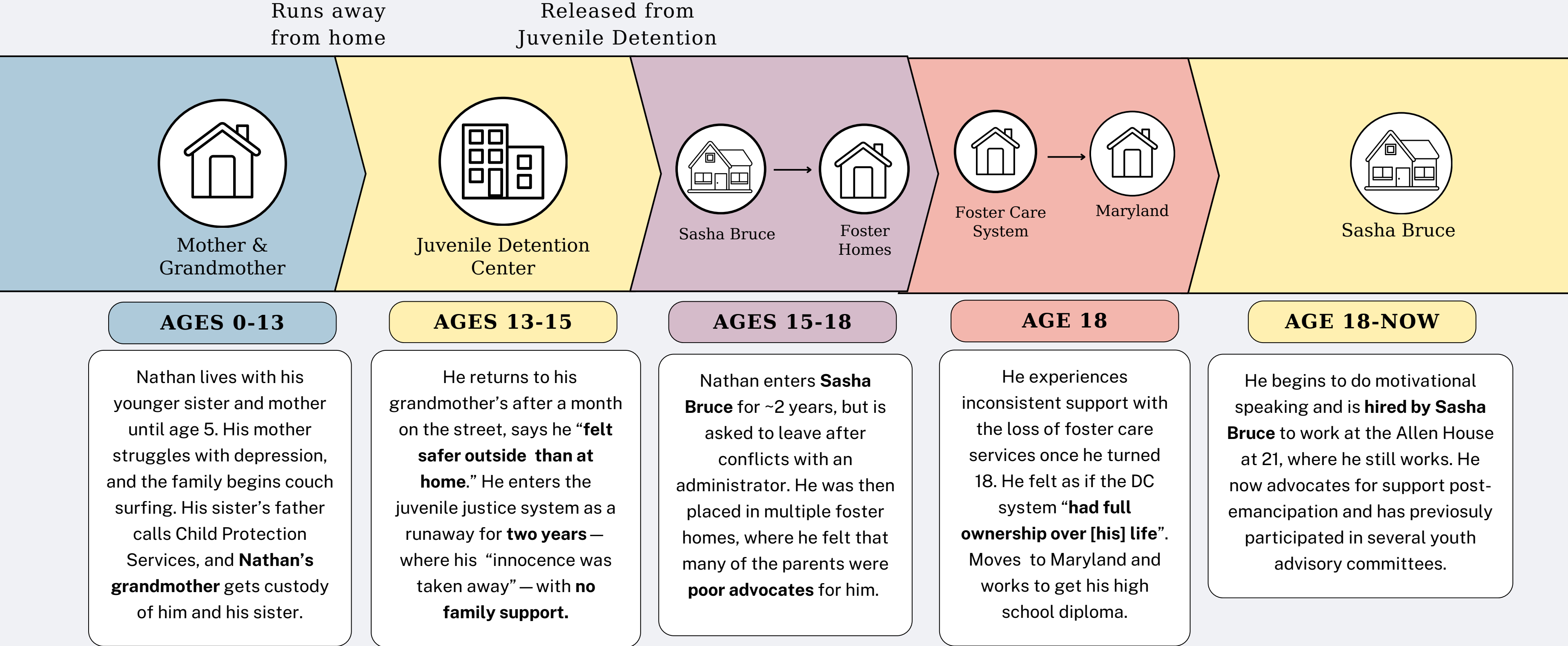
this time that he was connecting very well with over topics such as D.C. 's history, but he butted heads with some of the teachers at Sasha Bruce. No one in his family ever came to the facility to claim him, and an altercation with that teacher one day led to him being kicked out of the program. He was then placed in various foster homes. He said that he has had many foster parents, but he felt that many of them were extremely poor advocates for him. He had one foster mom who he felt was only in it for the monetary support; She often sent the children outside, did not provide them with meals, and would not facilitate transportation to and from school. He was allowed to see his mother at some points, but many of these visits devolved to altercations, and his foster parents would never step in to stop his mother from disparaging him. He had one family interested in adopting him, but stated that they wanted to give him a new name and essentially mold him into someone he was not, which he was extremely uncomfortable with.

He aged out of D.C.'s foster care at 18 and was moved over to Maryland. As he continued in the system, he worked to get his high school diploma and eventually obtained a lived experiences certificate from Howard University. He began to sit on the boards of various housing advisory committees and youth action boards, but felt that he was asked to pull a significant amount of weight with no appreciation or support in exchange. He also began to do some motivational speaking, and was offered a job with Sasha Bruce at 21. Now, he is just hoping to create a better legacy for himself. He hopes that the city will take some of his suggestions into consideration so that youth can be better equipped for emancipation, including rendering services until recipients are 21, not 18. He emphasizes that the youth are the true support network, and in order to reach more people, both the city and Sasha Bruce must lean into their own participants for reciprocal support.

Figure: Nathan's pathway through homelessness



Nathan African American
 Age 24 Straight
 Male From SE D.C.



Penelope, a 21 year old African American female, aged out of Sasha Bruce Youthwork's Grace House weeks prior, and now lives independently with her 2 year old child.

Penelope lived with her grandmother, mother and six siblings, including a twin and five sisters who were significantly older. Her father is incarcerated and she has never met him. Her mother was undergoing severe drug addiction issues when she was born. Penelope expressed being around a lot of drugs, violence and physical abuse, especially as her older sister resented her. She shared a strong bond with her twin sister growing up, who stood up for her against the rest of her family. Penelope described her house as being "in the middle of a war zone." At age four, Penelope had her first encounter with the foster care system, moving through different homes for a year before her grandmother gained guardianship of her and her sister.

By age 5, her mother stopped using drugs and began abusing alcohol instead. For a brief period of time she went back to living with her grandmother, but soon realized it was unsafe to do so, and went back into the foster care system. At age 6, her mother gained custody of the twins again. At age 7, she and her mother were brought to a transitional housing facility known as Wayne Place for a year, where they got kicked out and had to live on the streets. Her mother would sleep with men to find a place to stay, and never had enough food to feed herself, Penelope, or Penelope's twin. Penelope eventually went back to foster care in Maryland, but her mother threatened their potential adoption at the home, causing them to pull out of the adoption. She and her sister were then sent to a new foster home.

From ages 8 to 13, Penelope and her twin sister cycled between different foster care homes in Maryland. They slept in many Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) buildings. At age 9, she experienced living with an alcoholic foster parent. At fourteen, she and her twin sister refused to see their mother, and eventually settled at a foster home in Largo, Maryland after living in various transitional homes and shelters, including as part of Sasha Bruce Youthwork. However, her twin sister was kicked out and went to live at a foster home in Virginia, where she still resides. Finally at fifteen, she was allowed CFSA visitation with her mother, which caused her emotional pain when she would not show up due to her issues with alcohol abuse. Penelope lost contact with her mother after. Until she was 16, she stayed at a foster house in Beltsville, Maryland, which was her longest stay at a foster care home.

At age 17, she went to a college in North Carolina but experienced severe mental health issues. After a serious episode, she was suspended from college and returned to her foster home in Beltsville, MD. However, her foster mother started to distance herself as she saw Penelope's friends were poor influences on her actions. At 18, she moved to Upper Marlborough, Maryland. She found comfort in her foster parents and expressed finally finding a maternal figure. While living at her house, she found out she was 4 months pregnant. She originally planned to get an abortion, as she was worried about being perceived negatively. However, with her foster mother's support, she decided to keep the baby while staying at her foster home. At 20, Paris ages out of the foster care system, and she is currently living independently while looking forward to starting community college in the spring. At the time of this interview, she is not in contact with any of her family members.

When Penelope was living with her family, she entered the juvenile justice system twice. The first time, during a fight with her sister, her mother called the police on her for destruction of

property and assault, resulting in a 2 day sentence. The second time, her mother was intoxicated, slipped and hit her head against a surface. When the police arrived, she lied and claimed that her twins “jumped” her. In another incident, her house caught on fire when she was younger when her mother forgot about food on the stove. A young Penelope opened the window and helped her twin sister get out of the way, but this created a deep rooted fear of fires.

She also recounts multiple incidents of abuse, including being locked in a closet with cats, and sexual abuse. Once, she explains how she was spied on by an adult son of foster parents. She was uncomfortable speaking about it, and the man called a lawyer after panicking. She wanted to leave the house, and eventually it was shut down.

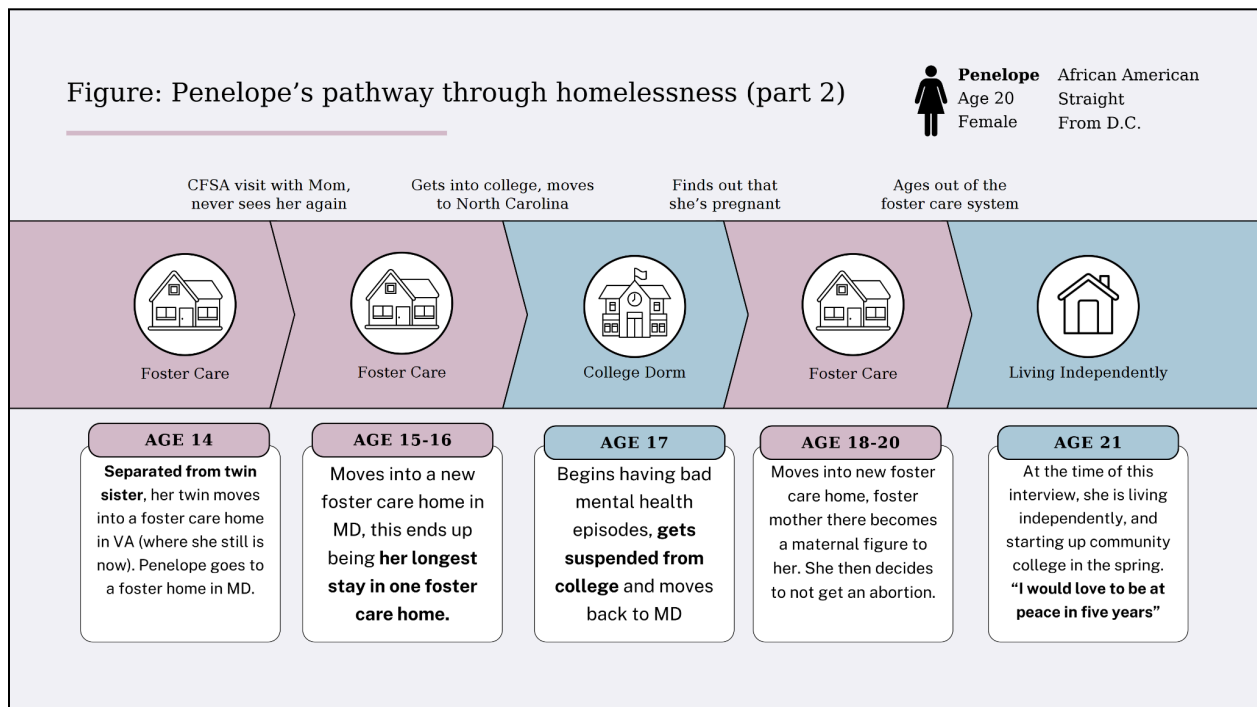
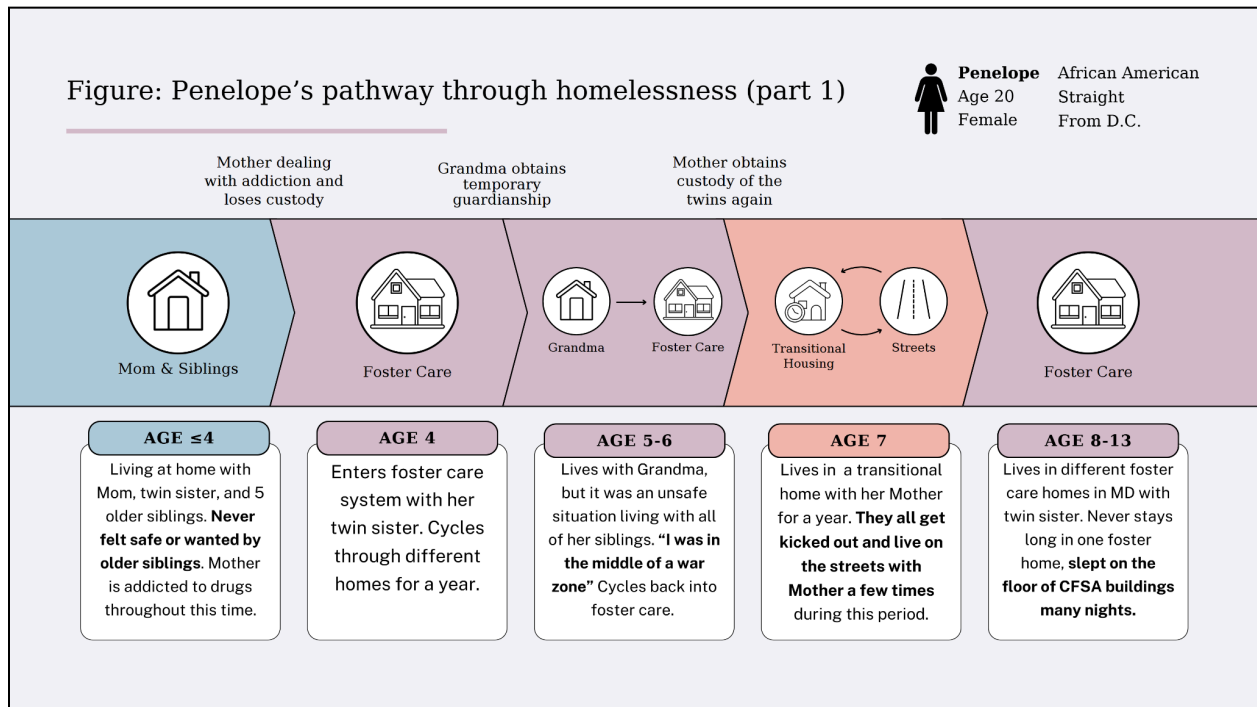
In the foster care system, Penelope narrated her experiences coming to Grace House and staying at transitional housing. She explained being sexually assaulted by an older girl in the transitional housing situation, and faced difficulty taking her son to school. These experiences led to much emotional trauma which carries on today. After moving to Grace House she recognized her unhealthy coping mechanisms, including hiding her emotions. She then learned to face her pain and her attachment issues due to losing her bond with her twin sister. She found difficulty finding a job, and faced negative treatment when trying to access services. She expressed having met disrespectful people while being in foster care, recounting an instance when social workers made rude comments about teenage mothers in foster care while in earshot of them.

Penelope joined Grace House and began receiving services in October 2024. She described how she received mandatory parenting classes, but did not find them useful unlike some others. She also expressed that Grace House does not provide necessary life skills classes as far as she recounts. She currently receives SNAP and DC Medicaid insurance and has a LifeSet partner who helps her with finding a job, getting an ID, and becoming independent. Penelope explained how at 21, she had to leave the foster system when she aged out, but that youth are prohibited from searching for apartments until their last thirty days in foster care. She expressed challenges with this system, as it is difficult to find a new home in so little time. She also described how foster care services are advertised as “for the people,” but, “they don’t actually go through with the services,” she explained. She explained most kids in the foster care system find out about resources through each other, rather than through Sasha Bruce Youthwork.. Penelope noted how they sat down together to apply for food stamps, apply to jobs, and study for exams. “We do more for each other than they do,” Penelope said.

In five to ten years, Penelope sees herself as being in school or about to graduate. She looks forward to beginning studying at Prince George’s Community College in March. She would like to earn and save money to leave D.C. and be happy, explaining “I would love to be at peace in five years.”

Penelope conveyed that D.C. must improve its overall system to provide services for homeless youth. She suggested mental evaluations on all employees upon hire, prohibiting false advertising, improvements in marketing their services, and more support for foster parents or staff in transitional homes. As mentioned earlier, most resources are spread by word-of-mouth. Penelope stated that she wished the system was more straightforward in sharing what services are available. One such service she wished was accessible is a website for hiring youth in foster care and other such advertisements. She also revealed that most foster parents and transitional housing workers

are tired of the kids and how they are treated, so they must be paid and supported better, especially when working with emotional or unstable children.



Tae is a 15-year-old African American female who has been in the foster care system for the past two years.

Tae entered the foster care system at 13-years-old when her parents were no longer able to take care of her and some of her 20 other siblings. Tae was moved into a group home where she said she felt unsupported, neglected, and uncomfortable with the group home staff, her case worker, and the other residents of the home.

After staying in the group home for a year, and shortly after her 14th birthday, Tae was arrested and entered the juvenile detention system. Tae described her experience with the juvenile detention system as “horrible,” and it made her see the foster care system more optimistically.

After her time in the juvenile detention system, Tae was moved from her first group home to Sasha Bruce Youthwork’s Allen House, a therapeutic group home, in September of 2024. During her time at Allen House, Tae has received the support and sense of community she was lacking at her first group home. Tae reported that the staff at Allen House helped Tae set and work toward her personal goals of being more outspoken and a better communicator. She highlighted that she feels more connected with the staff and other residents at Allen House because there is a culture that encourages sharing and growing from hardship. At Allen House, Tae is able to foster her interests in singing and RnB, making use of the in-house music studio to create and release music online with her brother. She also complemented Allen House in their commitment to fostering her job interview skills with workshops and presenting her with opportunities to gain work experience through their summer work program.

Looking toward her future, Tae is anxious about aging out of the foster care system and entering adulthood. Her biggest concerns are about obtaining housing and navigating taxes. However, Tae also has hope for her future and plans to attend college and pursue a career in music or entrepreneurship.

Figure: Tae's pathway through homelessness

Tae African American
Age 15 From D.C.
Female

