Press Release

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Contact Thinkofus@skdknick.com

Statement on Senate Investigation of Maltreatment at Youth Residential Treatment Facilities

Think of Us Calls for Reform, Increased Transparency

Washington, DC – On Friday, Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), Chair of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP), and Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR), Chair of the Senate Committee on Finance, released a letter to four major companies operating youth residential treatment facilities to investigate serious, longstanding allegations of child abuse, neglect, exploitation, and fatalities within the facilities they operate. These facilities serve foster youth, in addition to other vulnerable populations.

“This investigation is an important step to bringing transparency and accountability to an industry that has hurt so many young people for far too long. We need to shine a light on this type of misconduct and implement meaningful reforms so that no child ever experiences the trauma of maltreatment in a system meant to keep them safe,” said Sixto Cancel, CEO, and Founder of Think of Us, a non-profit research & design lab for foster care.

Think of Us is a leader in creating a platform for young people with lived experience to share their perspectives and expertise. In 2021, Think of Us released Away From Home, a first-of-its-kind report based on the lived experience of 78 young people who had recently been placed in institutions by the child welfare system. Think of Us believes that a deep, nuanced
understanding of the lived experience of young people who have spent time in foster care is essential to truly understand this system – and reform it.

Findings from Away From Home were cited by Senators Murray and Wyden in their letter to the companies.

Cancel continued, “Think of Us applauds Senators Murray and Wyden and the HELP and Finance Committees for listening to the voices of young people who have experienced living in residential facilities and for taking action to hold these facilities accountable. Think of Us will continue to build a world in which every child has the resources and support they need to heal, develop, and thrive within a safe, loving family.”

The Away From Home report includes dozens of findings and recommendations related to institutional placements, including:

- Institutional placements failed to meet the mandate of safety, permanency, and well-being in child-welfare.

- Practices in institutional facilities failed to address the underlying mental health needs they were meant to treat, instead, they were traumatic and unfit for healthy child and adolescent development.

- Youth in institutions were subjected to prison-like environments and punitive practices.

- Institutional procedures prevent youth from building relationships that would offer them stability, help them heal, or ease their transition into adulthood.

- Youth in institutions were made to feel hopeless and like they didn’t have a way out.

For more information, read the full report here. Visit thinkof-us.org for more information on our work.