

Senate Finance Committee
HB 110 – Interested Party Testimony
Tuesday, May 18, 2021

Good afternoon Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee. My name is Caidyn Bearfield, I am a Scholar Coordinator for the program Scholar Network at Columbus State Community College. This means that I help fellow former foster youth navigate our college and support them with all matters pertaining to being a successful college student and being foster care alumni. I am overcome with tremendous gratitude to have the platform to speak in front of my legislators. Much like many others who have been through the system, I did not leave unscathed. I say this to highlight the significance that these meetings hold. These meetings harbor potential to transform my needlessly painful experiences into actionable policies that prevent today's foster youth from enduring the same abuse. I would like to thank you for this opportunity.

When I first became aware of the campaign for a youth ombudsman with Ohio House Bill 110, it seemed like an obvious necessity. As someone with lived experience in foster care, please allow me to elaborate on the key reasons that we must implement this bill if we seek reduction in youth harm.

Social workers, county workers, caseworkers, floor staff, hospital aids, and police officers may all play a hand in the safety and wellbeing of youth, but many of them are already overworked and our problems are just more work for them, more paperwork, more hassle. They would rather sweep it under the rug. When constantly understaffed, great lengths to avoid burnout and punitive action for 'forgivable' offenses are taken– often at the expense of quality care. Imagine what it feels like to a young person to have your concerns dismissed and have no one else to turn to, when every adult who is supposed to help you is too busy or too jaded by the industry to take necessary action. In my experience at a congregate care facility, I reported abuse and it was swept under the rug. This meant that my peers and I were unsafe and powerless. An ombudsman would provide an alternative mechanism so that I could have reported it to someone outside the organization. It could have been independently investigated and a solution would be offered. The youth would feel supported and protected, rather than subjected to more trauma. I have also personally experienced that Ombudsman offices work. When I worked at a dementia care facility and witnessed abuse, I was met with the same dismissiveness I had experienced in foster care when I tried to report it to supervisors within the corporation. When I called the ombudsman, the abuse was finally addressed appropriately and promptly. When speaking to the ombudsman, I felt that my sense of urgency was finally being matched. I would have never been able to stop that abuse without the help of the elder care ombudsman. I feel strongly that this sentiment applies to the foster care system as well.

Today, we are speaking about literal children. Children, although trying their best, often are not able to make the best decisions for themselves. They are not always able to understand the severity of the consequences actions may have. The most notable example I have is youth AWOLing. Youth may run away from abuse, only to find themselves in even worse situations. There is a known trafficking problem in Ohio, and these sick criminals often target

runaway youth. Lives are on the line when it comes to widespread abuse within the children's protective services, and the solution is very well as straightforward as appointing them a trusted adult that will address their concerns without institutional bias and dismissiveness.

The office would meet these criteria:

1. Youth with lived experience are consulted on the design. This ensures efficacy of design, since only youth with lived experience fully understand the complicated experience of being in care.
2. The complaints are kept confidential when possible, when not possible; mandated reporting is fulfilled wisely. If a youth calls the ombudsman to report abuse by a guardian, and the guardian is made aware of this due to mandated reporting, the abuse towards the youth could intensify. This ensures safety of youth, and that youth feel safe to call when necessary.
3. The office is dedicated to youth to ensure that they are listened to and their concerns are taken seriously. The office does not serve families, foster parents, or any institution. This ensures youth are always the first priority, that there is no bias in decisions made.
4. The office should be trauma informed through rigorous training of staff. This ensures that the process of investigating complaints is not an additional traumatic event. It also aids the ombudsman office in communicating effectively with a youth that is exhibiting symptoms of trauma.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to my testimony today, I will defer to my co-panelists before taking questions.

Contact

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