

**Senate Judiciary Committee
HB 4 – Proponent Testimony
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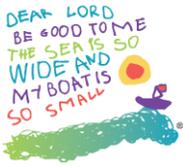
Chair Manning, Vice Chair McColley, and Ranking Member Thomas, I would like to take this opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 4 as amended by #134-2057-02, which reflects the vision of the Ohio Youth Ombudsman Coalition.

My name is Kim Eckhart and I work with the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio, a statewide non-profit organization which serves as an independent voice for all children. Our mission is to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. This mission led us to become a participant of the Youth Ombudsman Coalition.

A Youth Ombudsman is a beacon of hope for youth who experienced maltreatment and found that the current child welfare system failed to protect them. Now, they can finally say that House Bill 4 represents that hope. Previously, I submitted testimony on House Bill 4 requesting specific revisions that reflect the voices of those most affected by the child welfare system. I am pleased to say that in partnership with the sponsors of this legislation, we have crafted an amendment that provides for a Youth Ombudsman, appointed by the governor with advice from the OHIO Youth Advisory Board. In addition, the OHIO YAB will be involved with the Youth Ombudsman annual report, which will be a critical tool for system accountability.

These changes promise to establish the Youth Ombudsman office on a foundation that will allow it to be independent, youth-centered, and designed for and by young people who have been affected by the child welfare system. We have a lot of work to do to ensure that the implementation is effective, but the provisions in HB4 ensure that youth will have a seat at the table, and that is the first step toward system accountability and change.

The National Conference of State Legislatures describes each state's approach to establishing an ombudsman specific to child welfare. Of the 22 states that have statewide offices, Texas's Ombudsman for Children and Youth in Foster Care provides one model for a youth-specific approach. In FY21, in Texas, there were 273 substantiated reports by youth currently in foster care. Because the office is dedicated to youth, 715 contacts were referred to the adult-serving office, allowing more time for staff to attend to youth reports. The office made six recommendations for system-level changes stemming from the pattern of reports by youth, for example, limiting the timeframe a young person is placed in a psychiatric hospital. Data about the average length of stay in these facilities is an important measure of the impact of this office.



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CDF-Ohio is committed to studying the impact the Youth Ombudsman Office has on children. In early 2022, we will release a report offering a comprehensive review of current performance measures and recommendations for measuring transformation efforts. I encourage members of this committee to pass House Bill 4 and to continue to be a champion for this office as we demonstrate its impact.

CDF-Ohio is also committed to lifting the voices of youth to bring about change. I would be remiss if I did not elevate the voice of at least one young advocate who has said that without appropriate funding, this office is set up to fail. The current funding structure makes the Youth Ombudsman entirely dependent on the department of Job and Family Services because it does not have its own appropriation authority by the legislature. I urge you to establish clear appropriation authority to fund this effort in the next biennial budget.

Thank you for your attention and I am happy to answer any questions you might have.