

**Testimony to the Ohio House Finance Health and Human Services
Subcommittee**

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Raphael Weston

Good Morning. Thank you Mr. Chair and thank you committee members for letting me speak to you today. My name is Raphael Weston, I am 26 years old. I wanted to come in support of the need for services for Multi-Systems Youth. I know you are hearing from a lot of people talking about priorities for the budget and the need for services. Others will talk about research, statistics, and data, but for the next few minutes I would like to take you through my journey. As I share my story, remember I am not alone. I ask you to think about all the other multisystem youth out there who have similar experiences.

As a kid, you can't wait to be a grown up, especially if you were like me and suffering beyond your control. I am the youngest of three boys in a single parent home. I struggled with a learning disability while dealing with issues of abuse, abandonment and mental health. My single mother did not have a lot of support and did the best she could. She worked and attended college full time to try to better our lives.

I could not deal with my learning disability and no one understood my mental health issues. I became so frustrated and angry that I began to act out. I

became unmanageable. My mother did not know where to turn. She tried to get me counseling and treatment on her own but by age 12 my issues had become so severe that she decided to give up custody to children services. This only added to my abandonment issues. I wrestled with my demons and felt I had no support.

The abuse continued at the hands of a bad foster parent. Not all foster homes were bad, but the instability did not help my mental illness. By the time I was 17 I had been placed in 6 foster home and 4 institutions. During that time I was assessed, diagnosed, medicated, reassessed, re-diagnosed, re-medicated over and over. I never received consistent treatment and I didn't understand what was happening to me. It was scary and overwhelming to my mother as well. This contributed to my resistance to mental health treatment when I became an adult. I bounced around so much that I ended up attending 13 schools, never truly getting help to conquer my learning disability.

When I aged out I was completely unstable and unprepared to manage my issues. I had been assigned to so many different case managers, program staff, Doctors, and agencies that I did not know where to turn or who to listen to. I aged out of the system into homelessness and began to self medicate. I became very efficient on the street. I began to feel comfortable on the street because I felt that it was the only time that I had any control. Even when bad things happened.

The streets are hard but actually easy to navigate. You get a lot of help navigating the streets. Drug dealers, pimps, and gangs are there to take you in and teach you. They don't tell you that drugging, dealing, scheming and stealing are not good resume builders. The street life was not the life I really wanted but it was there and welcoming me.

Eventually, I found the OSU Star House. At that time, Star House was run by youth volunteers from the Youth Empowerment Program (YEP), OSU students, and Dr. Natasha Slesnick. I met Angela Lariviere and decided to begin volunteering with the Youth Empowerment Program. During my years in and out of homelessness I found the most support from Angela and other agencies I met through YEP.

Angela and YEP play a major role as it was the first time I was connected to positive peer support. Peer support is important because trust is a key issue among system involved youth. We have been abused, abandoned and neglected and for whatever reasons the systems did not work for us. By joining a positive peer advocacy group I began to get connected to services and learned how to help others. Peer Support is a bridge that we need to cross over into mainstream community services. My peer support network assisted me to address things case workers couldn't.

I was so inspired that I began to become a leader in other groups. I joined YouthMOVE Ohio and YouthMOVE National to advocate for the needs of youth. I got a job as a youth coordinator at NAMI Ohio. Through the support I got from YEP, Star House, YouthMOVE and NAMI Ohio I was able to positively progress in my treatment and stability. Without knowing it I had linked myself to a informal Wrap Around team and Peer support. This should have happened years earlier.

I feel grateful that I have met the people who have helped me progress along my journey, but the support I received was very random and self initiated. I was lucky to meet positive peers and learn about agencies that could help me. Most of my life was so hard, I just knew I wouldn't live passed the age of 21. I thought my future was death by self-harm or street life. If not death, surely prison. This was the case for many of my friends. I have seen too MANY of them die or end up in prison. I am amazed that I am standing here today still advocating for myself and others.

I was able to get the support I needed but it was only randomly by the grace of God. I know that if only one of those agencies turned me away I would not be here. That should not be the case. You have an opportunity to help us make the transition to adulthood smoother for other youth. By funding programs to provide High Fidelity Wrap Around services and Peer Support youth like me will have a chance to succeed.

Having access to intentional support and coordinated services would have made life easier for my family and myself. With in home support and service coordination I would have been more stable. I could have participated in my own treatment plan and not had so many different diagnosis. I also feel this would have helped my family learn to address core issues. I am certain that investing in home based support would be much more cost effective than 10 years, 6 foster placements, 4 institutions and multiple incidence of homelessness.

My journey has not been perfect but I am alive and I am here. I continue to struggle with my mental health but I am not in prison. I know my supports and my potential because of the network I made through NAMI Ohio, YouthMOVE and YEP. Other youth may not be so lucky. Thank you for hearing my story, thank you for caring, and thank you for support to fund Multi-Systems youth programs.