Homes For Kids Inc.
Child and Family Solutions
Opening Doors for Children & Families Since 1990

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Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Health and Human Services Subcommittee

April 9, 2019

Testimony on HB 166

Witness: Matt T. Kresic
Chief Executive Officer
Homes for Kids – Niles, Ohio

Chairman Romanchuk, Ranking Member West and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on HB 166.

My name is Matt Kresic; I am the CEO of Homes for Kids, Inc., a non-profit community agency headquartered in Niles, Ohio, with service locations throughout Northeast Ohio. Our organization provides foster care, independent living, and behavioral health services to vulnerable kids, young adults, and families. I am also honored to serve as the President of the Ohio Children's Alliance Board of Directors.

My organization, like the others represented here today, is committed to empowering vulnerable Ohioans by leveraging the State of Ohio's public systems, including health care, child welfare, and juvenile justice. Being a multi-system provider of care is critical since so many vulnerable Ohioans find themselves involved in multiple public systems. Over time, my organization has acquired cross-systems expertise that enables us to address the social determinants of health for our clients.

Last year, my organization was proud to help launch the State of Ohio's Bridges program. This program provides case management and housing services to young adults aging out of foster care. Bridges is a statewide program administered by ODJFS through a contract with the Child and Family Health Collaborative of Ohio, a social enterprise of the Children's Alliance. Homes for Kids is one of the Collaborative's sub grantees that works directly with young adults enrolled in Bridges.

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Bridges is a shining example of the State of Ohio thinking outside the box to develop innovative solutions to complex problems. The young adults my agency serves in Bridges are involved in multiple systems. Many have mental health or addiction challenges, histories of trauma or sexual victimization, and all of them come from broken families and have few have caring family members involved in their lives. Despite their challenges, these young adults are also some of the brightest and most resilient people in our state. The Bridges program provides a launch pad for them to enter adulthood successfully, and my organization is proud of the successes we've achieved in helping these young adults create life goals, secure housing, pursue higher education, and become fully employed.

WKBN News in Youngstown recently profiled one of our Bridges participants. He had a rough childhood and lived in five different foster homes before aging out of foster care at age 18. Now that he is in Bridges, he has safe and secure housing, he's working as a mentor at a high school, and he's actively pursuing his life goals. He has a bright future. The State of Ohio's Bridges program empowered him and is propelling him – and hundreds of others – for success in adulthood. As a program, Bridges is also committed to accountability. In fact, all Bridges participants are required to be employed or enrolled in school, unless they have a documented disability preventing them from doing so.

Since Bridges launched in February 2018, over 700 young adults have voluntarily enrolled in the program. It is funded for through the federal Title IV-E foster care program which involves a state match of 47%. As enrollment in the program is growing, HB 166 includes an increase of $5.7 million state funding per year for the program. This would increase the total state funding to just over $11 million per year. I strongly encourage the Legislature to maintain this proposed funding for Bridges.

Thanks again for your time today.

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Youngstown native finds success after life in foster care

Marquell went through the state's Bridges program

WKBN FIRST NEWS 27

YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio (WKBN) - Last February, the state of Ohio decided to make major changes to how it helps foster kids through a program called Bridges.

Now, almost a year into the program, are those changes helping the young adults prepare for the future?

Marquell has spent the last five years in foster care. He has stayed with five different families. He stayed with his aunt until this past April, until he got a letter in the mail saying he was emancipated.

The Youngstown native aged out of the Ohio Foster Care System when he turned 18 in March.

It happens to about 1,000 young adults every year.

"I was scared. I was really scared," Marquell said. "I didn't know what I was going to do. I didn't know where I was going to go."

Marquell and his aunt called their foster care caseworker who introduced them to the Bridges program.

"It was better than what I expected it to be," Marquell said. "Any other kids at 18 years old, they don't really have support."

The Bridges program began in February of 2018, created by Ohio House Bill 50. It allows young adults to stay within the foster care system until they turn 21 while living on their own.

The state pays for their housing and helps them with things like grocery shopping, applying for college and getting a job.

Marquell said in order to stay in the program, you have to be working.

The 19 year old works as a youth mentor at the Mahoning County High School, the school he used to attend.

Jennifer Merritt, superintendent at Mahoning County High School, said it was a natural fit for Marquell. She noticed that many of the younger students would reach out to him.

"The connections I was building with these kids and how far it was going, and how much they looked up to me, I just said, 'This is where I was meant to be,'" Marquell said.

Merritt said it's great for the school, too.

"The help and improvements he's made in the lives of our young students is absolutely incredible to see," she said.

Marquell said he sees himself in the students he mentors. He hopes to help them like the Bridges program helped him.

He wasn't always such a model student.

"I was getting tattoos at 13. I was just going down the wrong path," he said.

Marquell said he'll continue to help kids at the school, but eventually, he wants to start his own mentor program for foster kids in Youngstown.

"If these kids don't have somebody that they can look up to, there won't be any change like there was for me," he said. "If I didn't have the people in my circle that showed me another way, I still would have been doing the same."

For more information on the Bridges program, go to www.bridgestosuccess.jfs.ohio.gov or call (614) 656-6328. *Copyright 2019 Nexstar Broadcasting, Inc. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.*