

Dear Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Cutrona, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Committee.

My name is Samantha Shafer and I am the Chief Operating Officer with Integrated Services for Behavioral Health. I was born in Knox county Ohio, I am an independently licensed social worker, and for the past 15 years I have worked closely with public children service agencies and behavioral health providers serving children and families.

I had the honor of serving as one of Governor DeWine's Children Services Transformation Advisory Council members and was able to attend every forum held throughout the state. As a member of the council, I was grateful to see the thoughtful inclusive design and intention behind the planning of the forums. The Children Services Transformation Advisory Council team made sure all council members had access to all public, written and recorded testimony.

I was extremely humbled by the passion and courage of all those who shared their experiences. I, like many, were most moved by the stories shared with us directly from the mouths of youth who were currently in, or who had been served by Ohio's child welfare system.

After hearing and reviewing all testimony we came together as a council to discuss the information we had received and began to formulate our recommendations. Even with COVID-19 the council was able to pivot and engage in meaningful conversations using virtual platforms. Together we were able to formulate and move forward 37 recommendations.

My testimony today focuses on one of the critical messages we heard repeated as a top priority of both foster alumni and caregivers - the creation of a state-level ombudsman able to respond to concerns expressed by youth and caregivers connected to the children services and foster care system. I would like to express my support of the inclusion of a statewide ombudsman as presented in HB4 with the House Families, Aging, and Human Services Committee.

The inclusion of Ombudsmen would give a much-needed voice to foster youth and caregivers while also adding accountability. It is my belief that the state should consider a regional approach to this resource in order to assure the voices of youth and families in regions like southeast, Appalachian Ohio are advocated for and heard by entities that understand the unique challenges faced.

Finally, data gathered through the ombudsmen would support a statewide quality improvement process that would strengthen the system in ways that are directly influenced by the youth and families served. That same data and quality improvement processes would aid more targeted community and public outreach strategies that can support recruitment and retention of qualified foster care providers/resource families.

I thank you all for your time and am happy to make myself available for any additional conversations that would support these efforts.

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