

House Families, Aging, and Human Services Committee  
Proponent Testimony Sub HB4  
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Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Cutrona, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Committee, my name is Arlene Jones and I have experienced working as a caseworker for a public child welfare agency and service as a CASA for vulnerable children and youth. In addition to these experiences, I am one of the original 36 youth who came together and formed what is now known as the OHIO Youth Advisory Board, former foster youth, formerly homeless and unstably housed teen parent, current kinship caregiver and one of the privileged Ohioans appointed to serve on the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council where we worked diligently to develop recommendations for Ohio's child welfare system.

Today, I stand before you to provide my testimony in support of the recommendation for a statewide ombudsman for youth and caregivers connected to the children services and foster care system. As a member of the Children Services Advisory Council, I reviewed and listened to testimony from various stakeholders – relatives, kinship providers, private agencies, community stakeholders – all of whom voiced the need for a neutral point of contact that they can turn to for assistance with matters involving children. In addition to neutrality and impartiality, the ombudsman office should also have the following:

- Defined roles and responsibilities with the authority to address, investigate and resolve concerns, which should include record accessibility.
- Structure/Framework that includes those with lived experience (parents, resource parents, caregivers, foster youth, private providers, PCSA & JFS).
- Capacity for demonstrable accountability (expectation for actionable change for identified system issues; Annual Report to the Governor, Legislature, and ODJFS ; data/trends tracking; makes recommendations; commitment to evaluate and adjust operations overtime)
- Ability to provide public outreach, education, training & advocacy.

This statewide ombudsman office, in my opinion, should be inclusive of all youth and families being served by child welfare. Limiting the services of the office to youth in foster care creates another siloed agency in an Ohio system that is working to become de-siloed, creates a “speed-bump” in Ohio's efforts in moving toward a prevention-focused system and creates a barrier in accessing services and supports for youth and families.

On the books, my foster care case would be considered a “success.” We went home and never re-entered care; but, the real story is untold. During our protective supervision case, my mom

struggled with substance misuse and I became a teenage parent. Within 2 years of returning home, I was homeless teenage parent. We had relatives, friends and even neighbors who wanted to help, but were all afraid that if they made a call to children services, we would “disappear” again, and not because they did not know we were involved with children services, but because of the dynamics that they were aware of and had witnessed between the worker and our family and most importantly, how children services and other workers had engaged with families and communities.

Youth, fathers, aunts, grandparents, neighbors and many others need someone that they can all when they are genuinely concerned about the quality of care being deployed in their community. Children services is an organization that belongs to every community in Ohio and when the faith in any organization is tested, it is not the organization that restores that faith, but a neutral third party. It is not only children services and youth in foster care who needs this restoration, it’s the entire community. When I went into foster care, I came from a community. Every family touched by children services is part of a community. We as a community need this office. I need this office.

It is for all of these reasons that I am in support of the amendment for a statewide ombudsman to HB 4. I thank you for your time and am happy to answer any of your questions.