

Ohio House of Representatives Finance Committee
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Thrive Behavioral Health/Warren County Children Services/ Ohio Start Program

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Good morning Chairman Oelslager, Vice-Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Crawley and members of the House Finance Committee.

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today. My name is Sarah Lynn Hayden. I am a Peer Supporter at Warren County Children Services and work with families who participate in the Ohio START Program. I have worked in child welfare for three years but my involvement with children services didn't start with my job.

My story starts when I was placed into foster care at 6 weeks old due to my mother's struggle with mental health and drug addiction. This was the beginning of my journey as a statistic within the foster care system. A child already labeled due to the decisions of others. I remained in foster care until I was adopted at the age of 4.

As many children in the child welfare system, my hardships did not end when I was adopted. I was sexually abused by a family member from the age of four until I was eight. I tried to tell but no one heard or believed me. My voice was taken from me and I was feeling unloved and abandoned.

These feelings intensified in my teen years after finding out I was adopted, my biological mother did not want me (in part because I am biracial), and not knowing who my father is, in addition to the trauma I had experienced. I was lost, scared, and confused.

I started using alcohol and cocaine at the age of 14. I gravitated towards the bad crowd to feel a sense of belonging and get back at those who hurt me or didn't believe me. I started to get a rap sheet and I was in jail facing 10 years by age 22. While in jail, I found out I was pregnant. I was scared calling my parents to share what would be happy news for most, but it is not happy news when you're on your way to prison. My parents assured me they loved me and would support me through my pregnancy and jail time.

I was released on probation and ordered into treatment. I quickly regressed by opening my house to men who sold drugs, used me, and I relapsed. As a result, I was sentenced to prison while my parents cared for my 6-month-old baby girl.

In prison, I was Inmate WO 75645. Stripped of my identity not unlike what happens to foster children in our system. I was incarcerated for 32 months. I never wanted to be a mom that choose drugs or men over my child and this time in prison was my ah-ha moment. I began to explore my pain, my fears, and tried to see my self-worth.

My clean date is October 22, 2010. I was no longer willing to let my history define my identity. I found strength I did not know I had to make changes. There have been many obstacles,

but I made a promise to myself and my children I would be better each day and am proud of each accomplishment I've made.

I found a job in childcare as a Family Advisor. I saw myself in the kids and families and began working to offer resources and compassion. I wanted them to know I understood and did so with no judgment. I saw the benefit of helping those in need. People without support network built into their lives and how having this can lead others to succeed. How showing care to a frustrated mother can deter abuse. How providing resources to a family can avoid neglect.

My journey is not without additional challenges. I have had toxic relationships, have suffered from depression and anxiety, have been involved in an open case with children services, and have struggled with my sobriety. I now feel I have a purpose driven life to help children and families who want a new start.

My path led me to Peer Support. By 2018, I was a Certified State of Ohio Peer Support Specialist hired through Warren County Children Services to be a part of the Ohio Start Program. I work alongside caseworkers to support families. Every day, I use my labels (addict, inmate, foster child, mother, victim, survivor), my scars, and my strength to help families see recovery is possible. I walk hand in hand with the families, their hurt, their obstacles, and their successes. My favorite quote is, "A Closed Mouth Doesn't Get Fed." When I wasn't advocating for myself, nothing I needed or wanted was being heard. So today, I am speaking for others who don't have a voice.

My role at children services is vital and the work we do is not easy. The real-life situations can be daunting. The overdoses, the abuse kids face, and the lack of basic needs are real. Intervening early with children helps prevent the cycle of abuse, promotes child safety, and builds long-lasting resilience. We do this job because we care and want to see change.

As you make decisions about funding for children services in the state budget, I ask you to remember my journey. Consider the impact children services agencies can make on someone like me as a child and as an adult.