

Senate Finance Committee

HB 110 – Interested Party Testimony

Tuesday, May 18, 2021

Good afternoon, Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the Senate Finance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of provisions for foster youth in House Bill 110. My name is Chauna Mason and I come here today to represent the Junior League of Columbus as the Community Impact Council Chair for the 2021-2022 year. In early 2020, after months of consideration, conversations, and community work, the League announced the creation of our signature project called Bridging the GAP to help guide, advocate, and provide for youth in foster care and specifically those youth aging out of the foster care system and transitioning into independent living.

During this past year, we have spent time getting to know advocates in this space and the organizations serving these youth, including the Children's Defense Fund of Ohio and the Youth Advisory Board, whom you have already heard from today. After a year of learning from and growing with these organizations and the youth they serve, it is clear to us that a Youth Ombudsman Office is a necessity for foster youth in the state of Ohio.

We are here specifically advocating for the following provisions to be added to HB 110:

1. To establish an independent and autonomous Youth Ombudsman Office outside of the Department of Jobs and Family Services.
2. To define the powers and duties of the Youth Ombudsman Office.
3. To explicitly state that the Youth Ombudsman Office be dedicated to youth and not to serve youth and caregivers.
4. To mandate that current and former foster youth be involved in the design and operation of the Youth Ombudsman Office.

In adding these provisions to the bill, you would be helping to clear the path for foster youth in Ohio to receive guidance, support, and representation through an independent and youth focused office. Too many youth in the foster care system feel unheard, ignored, and lost. With the creation of an independent Youth Ombudsman Office, youth will have the chance to participate in the creation of the office that will serve them and rest easy knowing that this office will be there for them and only serve their interests and not the interests of the adults and other people in their lives who are so often heard the loudest.

I want to express my gratitude to you all for being here today and listening to the testimony brought forward by the youth and those who serve them every day. And I want to thank you for your consideration in adding the provisions mentioned above when creating the Youth Ombudsman Office.

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for allowing me to provide testimony here today in support of the specific provisions to HB 110. I am happy to try to answer any questions you may have.