

Tuesday, May 4, 2021
Ohio Senate
General Government Budget Committee
HB 110 – Interested Party Testimony

Good afternoon Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Craig, and members of the Senate General Government Budget Committee. My name is Juliana Barton, and I am the Governmental Liaison for ACTION Ohio, the statewide voice of foster care alumni. In Fall 2019, I was appointed by Ohio Governor Mike DeWine to serve on his Children's Services Transformation Advisory Council, where I provided my expertise as an aged-out former foster youth to help inform advocacy and decision-making for children involved in Ohio's child welfare system. It is my honor to stand before you today in support of adding specific language to HB 110 that reflects the voices, concerns, and policy recommendations of Ohio's current and former youth. This includes the creation of a Youth Ombudsman Office:

1. Established independently from children's services to serve as an alternative mechanism for investigating the complaints of youth experiencing abuse in biological, adoptive, or other out-of-home placements.
2. Dedicated to serving youth and young adults separately from any mechanism designed to support caregivers to avoid conflict of interest.
3. Designed by current and former foster youth.

I am originally from Northwest Ohio, where despite numerous warning signs, the child welfare system failed to protect my safety and well-being. On September 4th, 2004, I found myself in a situation that no child should ever be faced with; bloody and bruised, I had just been brutally assaulted by my father. Seeking shelter behind a nearby school, I realized that I had no one to reach out to for help.

This wasn't the first time my father had injured me; I had been enduring his abuse for most of my childhood. Over the course of 17 years, each school I attended documented visible signs of abuse and neglect, reaching out to Child Protective Services numerous times. At first, I was forthcoming with information when questioned about my father. But each visit ended without intervention, followed shortly by my father's anger once we were alone again. Hopelessly, I realized that the people I had been taught to trust, the people who were meant to help when a person felt unsafe, were not actually going to help me. Instead, I became better at hiding the abuse to prevent others from reaching out on my behalf. But as I grew with age, so did the severity and frequency of abuse. Further frightening, my father had recently begun threatening to end both his and my life. On the Saturday that I lay hidden behind the school, I reluctantly reached out to children's services after spending hours with no other avenue for seeking help.

With a sense of urgency that I had not been given previously, I was whisked away and placed into protective custody. It was not until I later caught a glimpse of my reflection in a mirror, that I realized the extent of my injuries. At the children's services agency, one of the first questions I was asked during my interview was, "Why hadn't [I] reached out for help sooner?" Except that I had, and so had many others on my behalf. Despite my father's history of substance abuse, domestic violence that included court cases from two other individuals, and over a decade worth of documentation and reports made by my schools to children's services and the police, it would not be until my father severely injured me that children's services finally intervened. An office designed by and serving youth and young adults could have prevented the years of abuse I suffered by providing an alternative mechanism to investigate the complaints against my father after children's services failed to intervene.

I am certain that had I not left that day, I would not be here today or able to stress the importance of including the aforementioned language to HB 110. I appreciate your time and consideration of these recommendations and would welcome any requests for further information.

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