

Senate General Government Budget Committee

HB 110 – Interested Party Testimony

May 4, 2021

Good afternoon Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Craig and members of the Senate General Government Budget Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony behalf of the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio in support of provisions for foster youth in House Bill 110.

CDF-Ohio is a statewide non-profit organization which serves as an independent voice for all children. Our mission is to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. We work to champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure quality education as well as appropriate and targeted access to resources to meet children's health and nutrition needs.

I am writing to encourage you to develop and invest in an independent Youth Ombuds Office in Ohio's FY22-23 biennial budget. This office would act as a safeguard to ensure that youth have someone to call who will listen and advocate for them, protecting the rights of children and youth in care by investigating and resolving reports brought by youth in biological, kinship, foster, adoptive, respite, residential and group home placements.

Governor DeWine included \$1 million in the FY22-23 biennial budget bill, HB110, to establish an Ombuds Office after the Children's Services Transformation Advisory Council recommended creating an Ombuds Office for caregivers and youth in its 2020 report. However, the bill does not include a specific appropriation or clearly state that there will be an office dedicated to foster youth. It also does not clearly state that the office will be independent from the Department of Job and Family Services or that current and former foster youth will have a role in its design and implementation.

Specifically, I am asking for provisions to be added to HB 110 that:

1. State clearly the newly established Youth Ombuds Office will be dedicated to youth and not combined with an office for caregivers;
2. Establish the office as independent from children's services; and
3. Mandate that this office be designed by current and former foster youth.

The Youth Ombuds Office should be designed thoughtfully and carefully. There will be decisions about whether the office should be housed within the state government or as a private non-profit organization and what statutory authority it requires. Each of these decisions should be made with current and former foster youth input. We do not include recommendations about where the office should be located, but we do address the fact that it should not be housed within the Department of Job and Family Services. In the 21 other states that have ombuds offices, there is a wide variety of structures and we can provide details on each.

In Ohio, there are other examples of ombuds offices that serve the needs of specific groups. The Long-term Care Ombuds office works to resolve problems related to the health, safety, welfare, and rights of individuals who live in long-term care facilities, such as nursing homes. People with disabilities also have been protected by a state ombuds office, which was formerly housed in the independent Legal Rights Service, and has since become the nonprofit Disability Rights Ohio.

One way to move forward toward an independent office dedicated to youth would be to use the initial allocation of \$1 million as part of a procurement process. The request for proposals, or RFP process, offers an opportunity to define clear goals, and then score the proposals in terms of how well they aligned with those goals. Providing current and former foster youth an opportunity to have input on the RFP and score the proposals would ensure that the office would actually meet the needs of youth. For example, if an organization proposes to hire former foster youth, create a 24-hour hotline, and institute trauma-informed training for all staff, then current and former foster youth would be able to evaluate that within a comprehensive scoring rubric.

Thank you again for your work on this critical issue and on behalf of Ohio's children.