

House Finance Committee

HB 164 – Proponent Testimony

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Chair Edwards, Vice Chair LeRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 164.

My name is Caidyn Bearfield, and I am very grateful to have the platform and privilege to speak with my legislators today. For context, I was in foster care as a teenager and have spent my entire adult life participating in organizations which serve current and former foster youth. It is not just from my personal experience, but also the experiences of my community that inform my speaking today.

The Foster-to-College Scholarship Act could provide hope and means to a better future for Ohioans who experienced foster care as a teenager by having access to free tuition, room and board. No one should have to choose between meeting their present needs and setting themselves up for success in the future. Many former foster youth (and other low-income populations) have faced this difficult question: do I want to pay my bills or continue going to school? With the rising cost of necessities (rent, groceries, etc.) it is inevitable that more and more people will face this dilemma, if it's not this same dilemma that prevents them from being able to begin their schooling.

I wholeheartedly believe that every human being is entitled to the means to support themselves. This is not about 'hand-outs', this is about enabling a strong foundation to be built so that we are not dependent upon assistance programs for the rest of their life. To quote Children's Defense Fund, "Ohio ranks near the bottom of the country for young adults who were in foster care who are reaching their potential. A staggering 40% lack a high school diploma, more than half were unemployed at age 21 and more than 1 in 3 experienced homelessness". When youth do not believe they are likely to succeed, even if they try their best, the lack of hope and security can cloud judgment and lead to behavioral issues. As someone who has spent over a year in congregate care facilities, including facilities specifically targeted for youth with behavioral and mental health issues, I can promise you that a leading cause of behavioral and mental health issues stem from a feeling of hopelessness that feels inescapable. It would be an enormous game changer in care to have known that if I could just make it through this hard time, I would have the means at the end of it to create a better life for myself. I truly believe that if more teens in care knew this, not only would we immediately see those high school graduation numbers climb, but the incidences of self-harm, suicide attempts, and overdoses in current and former foster youth would fall.

It is detrimental to specifically and directly allocate funds towards tuition, room, and board for foster care alumni. Suggesting that former foster youth rely on existing scholarship and grant options simply does not consider the reality of circumstances that foster youth have faced. When I was in care, we only had school for 3 hours a day. I was supposed to be a sophomore and was in the same classroom as kids who were supposed to be in seventh grade and supposed to be high school seniors. When I returned to public school, I was years behind my peers and there was nothing that I could do about it. Many teens in care switch schools multiple times and/or experience similar subpar schooling in the facilities they reside in. Meanwhile, no one has a happy story about entering the child welfare system. These educational

disadvantages occur during a time when we are processing trauma and when our brains are still developing. For these reasons, competitive scholarships and grants that require high GPAs and participation in extracurricular activities are out of reach for us.

Housing and other basic needs are already paramount concerns for youth exiting the child welfare system. By providing tuition, room, and board not only would every foster alum have a safe, indoor, place to sleep and eat meals but they would be equipped with the resources to be able to provide this for themselves in the future. The community of young adults with lived experiences in foster care has been through a lot and we deserve to be invested in. I have seen time and time again when someone is able to get on their feet, they choose to serve their communities and this positive momentum compounds. Please, invest in our futures and give us a fighting chance at independence without more interim trauma. I think that you will be amazed the good things we are capable of when our circumstances allow us to thrive. Thank you so much for taking the time to listen to me today. It is an honor and a privilege to be able to speak directly to my legislators. I appreciate your willingness to address this important issue and thank you for your time!