

Senate Finance Committee
SB 182 and HB 164– Proponent Testimony
November 12, 2024
Gabriella Craft , Foster Care Alum

Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and distinguished members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify in favor of Senate Bill 182 and House Bill 164.

My name is Gabriella Craft and I was in foster care as a teenager. I have known since the 6th grade that I wanted to be a social worker and since 8th grade that I wanted to attend the Ohio State University and obtain both my Bachelors and Master's in Social Work. That's what I set out to do and I accomplished it.

Since then, I have supported today's foster youth in succeeding in higher education. This includes my former role at the Columbus Scholar House for Foster Youth, my support of the Columbus State Scholar Network and my current work to support the Fostering Achievement Network at The Ohio State University.

I was blessed to have one foster care placement till 18 years old. The problems for me began when I aged out of care in 2005. One of the first challenges I faced when I got to college after aging out of care was with housing. I now have significant student loan debt because I had to borrow to pay for housing while going to school. I'll never forget my freshman year when I found out that I was forced to stay in dorms on campus, yet I had nowhere to go during college breaks. It was extremely difficult to find a place to stay during the breaks. Like many former foster youth, the only places I could find were toxic environments. Many foster youth put themselves in unhealthy situations, even in abusive situations, just to have a place to stay.

A scholarship program that covers the full cost of attendance while in college would vastly improve retention. It would enable former foster youth to have access to safe affordable housing while obtaining their degree. While working with former foster youth in higher education, I have seen too often when a young adult has to interrupt their college journey due to financial reasons. Some can't afford all the costs associated with school. Others cannot afford stable housing. This bill could be a game changer for so many former foster youth so they can achieve their college dreams.

When former foster youth attain post-secondary success, society benefits as well. By nearly any measure, college graduates outperform their peers who have only completed their high school degree. They are 24% more likely to be employed. They are less reliant on government services. An average Bachelor's degree recipient contributes \$381,000 more in taxes than they use in government services and programs over their lifetime.

In my many roles to support former foster youth, I have seen firsthand the difference that additional support can make. Working with college students and my own experience aging out has shown me that supportive adults combined with financial aid really can shape the future of young people. I hope that you will join me in supporting Senate Bill 182 and House Bill 164 to establish the Foster-to-College Scholarship program.