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**Representative Dontavius L. Jarrells**  
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**Ohio House District 1**

Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 164, *the Foster-to-College Scholarship Act*. I would also like to express my gratitude to Senator Michelle Reynolds for championing this cause by introducing Senate Bill 182, our companion bill. These bills reflect a deep, bipartisan commitment to Ohio's foster youth—a commitment to giving every child a fair chance at a successful future.

H.B. 164 is more than legislation; it's a lifeline for foster youth who, despite tremendous resilience, face challenges few of us can imagine. By joining 35 other states that offer similar scholarships, Ohio has the opportunity to say to these young people: ***"You are not alone. Your future matters to us."***

The first major change was **clarifying the role of the foster care liaisons**. With these new provisions, foster care liaisons will:

- Collaborate with both public and private child-placing agencies, ensuring each foster child has a trusted advocate within the educational system.
- Support school stability by helping foster students stay in their school of origin or transfer smoothly when needed, reducing the disruptions that can hinder academic progress.
- Facilitate transition planning, assist with school enrollment, and provide clear information about the *Foster-to-College Scholarship Program*, so foster youth have a pathway to success.
- Promote interagency collaboration and safety initiatives to create a strong, supportive network around each foster child.

The second significant update involves **scholarship calculation and funding sustainability**. The bill now includes a needs-based scholarship calculation aligned with federal financial aid standards, with deductions for resources like Pell Grants, state grants, and Chafee ETV grants. Additionally, to ensure that funding remains sustainable, we included a reappropriation clause. This provision allows any unused scholarship funds to roll over into the next fiscal year, ensuring that these vital resources are consistently available for the foster youth who need them.

During committee testimony, we heard the story of Kurt Holden, Director of Public Safety and Chief of Police at Wright State University. He is a shining example of what's possible—of a

foster child who defied the odds to reach a position of leadership and influence. But Chief Holden's journey is, sadly, the exception. Today in Ohio, foster youth face daunting statistics: lower high school graduation rates, fewer job opportunities, higher justice system involvement, and restricted access to higher education compared to their peers.

This bill provides us with the power to change that narrative. By removing financial barriers to college, we can help foster youth achieve their potential and contribute to our communities in profound ways. The scholarship program has been carefully structured, with input from Ohio's higher education community, to ensure that the state covers remaining tuition costs after other grants and scholarships have been applied. The annual investment of \$7.5 million is a modest portion of our scholarship budget, yet it holds the power to transform lives.

The economic case is compelling: here in Ohio, college graduates earn nearly double the income of those with only a high school diploma. They are employed at higher rates, strengthening our workforce and fueling our state's economy.

But beyond economics, there is a generational impact. Studies show that children whose parents have attended college are much more likely to pursue and complete higher education themselves. By enabling foster youth to attend college, we are planting seeds that can grow into cycles of opportunity and success, changing family trees and enriching Ohio for generations to come.

I'd like to leave you with the words of Caidyn Bearfield, a student at Columbus State Community College and a former foster youth, who captures the heart of this legislation. Caidyn said, *"Offering scholarships to students with experience in foster care will create a strong foundation so they are not dependent upon assistance programs for the rest of their life. These scholarships would be a life-affirming preventative measure to equip today's foster youth to defy the statistical trends we have seen for so many decades and break the cycle."*

This is what the *Foster-to-College Scholarship Act* represents: the chance to break cycles, offer hope, and build a brighter future for some of Ohio's most vulnerable young people. I want to personally thank each of you for the opportunity to discuss this critical legislation, and we are pleased to answer any questions you may have at this time.

Thank you.