

House Children & Human Services Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 96
Submitted by: Gabriella Craft, Student, Columbus State Community College
March 5, 2025

Thank you, Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify in support of including the Foster-to-College Scholarship Program (House Bill 25) in House Bill 96.

My name is Gabriella Craft, and I was in foster care as a teenager. I was blessed to have one foster care placement in one home from 14 to 18 years old. The problems for me began when I aged out of care in 2005. Even though there were plenty of programs available to foster youth who age out of care and want to attend college, I was not informed of any of the resources. I have known since the 6th grade that I wanted to be a social worker, and I have known since about 8th grade that I wanted to attend The Ohio State University and obtain both my bachelor's and master's degrees in social work. That's what I set out to do, and I accomplished it. I obtained a Bachelor of Science in Social Work and a Master's in Social Work from OSU. I have also worked with many former foster youth who attended college throughout my recent career. I served as a foster care case manager, a case manager providing programming and support to former foster youth in a housing program, and I have provided peer support at a community college in a holistic program that supports former foster youth.

One of the first challenges I faced when I got to college after aging out of care was housing. In the dorms, you have to leave during breaks, and it's difficult when you have nowhere to go. It's also very difficult when you don't have money for housing. This is partly why my loans are so high—I had to borrow money to live on while going to school. I'll never forget my freshman year when I found out that I was forced to stay on campus yet had to leave during break times. It was extremely difficult to find a place to stay during the breaks. Sometimes, like many former foster youth, the places I would stay were toxic environments.

Many foster youth put themselves in situations that are not good for them—sometimes even abusive—just to have the stability of a place to stay. Fully funding a scholarship program that covers the full cost of attendance would enable former foster youth to have access to safe, affordable housing while obtaining their degrees. I have achieved success through graduating with a Master's in social work. It would have been extremely helpful for me to have a scholarship that would pay for my schooling. While I was in school for my bachelor's and master's, I did not have the support of a holistic support program like the Scholar Network at Columbus State. It wasn't until I came to Columbus State in Spring 2021 to pursue my entrepreneurship certificate that I experienced the difference a program like Scholar Network can make in helping someone stay in college. Even going back to school when I was older was a challenge for me. Every time I had an issue, the Scholar Network was there to support me.

As a Scholar Network Coordinator, I have seen firsthand how consistent support can determine whether someone drops out of college or persists. I have helped students navigate resources such as ETV, Ohio Reach Emergency Funds, and Medicaid/Food Stamps. One student in particular was struggling with housing and motivation to stay in school. Although it took a year of consistent outreach, that student returned to Columbus State and is now thriving.

The Foster-to-College Scholarship Program is important because the current programs are insufficient. One of the biggest issues is the age limit on many programs offered to former foster youth, because it assumes that youth are informed of these services when they are not. I found out literally one day too late—past my birthday—about ETV funds. I only discovered it while doing research for a social work class, because I was interested in policy for former foster youth. Yes, Bridges and ETV exist, but they have strict age requirements and many youth do not learn of them in time. With the focus on family preservation, even in cases where reuniting with the family is not in the youth's best interest, many teens are reunited with their biological family right before they would age out, making them ineligible for programs that would help them.

Overall, from my experience aging out of care and from working with college students who are alumni of care, the current systems in place are not enough. Housing is the number-one barrier, and the second is not being able to afford college. These barriers cannot be resolved by existing programs alone. I believe a fully funded scholarship program for Ohio's former foster youth will increase the number of skilled workers in Ohio's workforce and set many youth on the path to success.

We respectfully request that this Committee include funding for House Bill 25's Foster-to-College Scholarship Program in House Bill 96. Thank you for your consideration.