

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett and members of the House, Children and Human Services Committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony regarding the vital importance of establishing the Foster-to-College Scholarship Program.

My name is Jaleshia Brown. I am a former foster youth. I spent 11 years in foster care and aged out of the system at 18. My emancipation took place without me, without my knowledge, and without any transitional planning. I was emancipated while in Dayton trying to pursue higher education. During my second semester, I was kicked out of my dorm and school. I reached out to my caseworker afterwards and learned that I had been emancipated and no longer in foster care. This was my first episode of homelessness. This was the beginning of my post-secondary education journey.

Ohio ranks in the bottom 10% nationally for foster youth outcomes in areas such as high school graduation, employment, and post-secondary enrollment. This significantly increases the chances of poverty, arrest, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, and homelessness. The Foster-to-College Scholarship Program makes post-secondary education more accessible to a vulnerable population. Not only will this provide funding for tuition, fees, and other costs that aren't covered by existing state and federal funding, but it also includes a foster care liaison--a knowledgeable supportive person that will help youth navigate through college, identify and remove barriers, while encouraging them along the way.

It took me almost a decade to obtain a four-year degree. I continued to hit every wall year after year as I continued my post-secondary education journey. I experienced teenage pregnancy. I experienced homelessness. I experienced domestic violence and depression. I experienced lack of support and encouragement; I experienced lack of guidance and hope. I've slept in my car, missed days of showering, missed meals and went hungry. I struggled with self-medicating and substance use. I did it all while being a single mom, working multiple jobs. This was my post-secondary education journey. I did not only experience these obstacles, but I survived them. I graduated top of my class with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and a certification in violence prevention. I am part of the the 3% of former foster youth to obtain a four-year degree, but again, it took almost a decade. The Foster to Scholarship Program will make these journeys easier and shorter for foster youth to come and will increasing graduation rates.

This provision was already highly favored in the House boasting 58 co-sponsors, including five members of this committee, along with an impressive vote of 84 in favor of HB 184 with only three opposing voices. Every young person is just one caring adult away from becoming a success story, and those stories can begin with each of you. Together we can create a different story, one where every child has the opportunity to thrive. You have the remarkable chance to be the caring adults who transform the lives of hundreds—perhaps thousands—of current and former foster youth. By doing so, you're not just providing support; you're building a bridge to better outcomes and brighter futures. Thank you.