

House Finance Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 96
Dr. Barbara Oettgen, Fostering Connections Program, Nationwide Children's Hospital
April 2, 2025

Thank you, Chair Brian Stewart, Vice Chair Michael Dovilla, Ranking Member Bride Rose Sweeney, and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify in support of including funding for House Bill 25's "Foster-to-College Scholarship Program" in House Bill 96. We respectfully request that this appropriation be included through amendments HC1399 or HC0787.

As a pediatrician in the Fostering Connections program at Nationwide Children's Hospital, I care for a large number of teens who are in foster care (from all over the state of Ohio), many of whom will age out of foster care at age 18. As part of providing complete health care, we spend time talking with teens about their future and helping them gather the tools to be successful as they enter young adulthood. We do so because we know that it is a difficult road for these teens, and the statistics are sobering. Of the youth aging out, approximately 25% will become homeless by the age of 26 (compared to 4% of the general population), 26% will be incarcerated by age 21 (compared to 0.06% of the general population), and only 66% will get their high school diploma or GED by the time they are 21 (compared to 89% of the general population).

Through no fault of their own, these teens have already faced so many uphill struggles, and House Bill 25 allows them to access a smoother path. With appropriate resources, they can have hope to achieve their dreams of pursuing a trade or college degree. For teens who are adopted from foster care, the "Foster-to-College Scholarship Program" will help relieve the financial burden of attending post-secondary school—especially since adoptive families will not have had the opportunity to prepare for this cost.

A story about one of my patients might underline how useful such a program could be. D.A. entered foster care in 2019 because of parental substance abuse, physical abuse, and neglect. As a result, she battled significant mental health issues including suicidal thoughts and an attempt. In the stable and nurturing care of her foster parent, and with consistent mental health care, she was able to manage her trauma and depression. She is now attending a prestigious Ohio university where she hopes to embark on a path to become a neurosurgeon. She has many hurdles still, but with the assistance of House Bill 25, one of those barriers—financial assistance—will be diminished.

House Bill 25 presents an opportunity to change the trajectory for these youth who have already endured so much. We respectfully request that the Committee include funding for House Bill 25's "Foster-to-College Scholarship Program" in House Bill 96 and adopt amendments HC1399 or HC0787. Thank you for your consideration.

Warm regards,
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