

House Finance Committee
Proponent Testimony on House Bill 96
Testimony of: Julia Marino
April 8, 2025

Thank you, Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, for the opportunity to testify on the importance of the Foster-to-College Scholarship Act, which I respectfully ask you include in the House Budget (HB 96).

Last week, ten-year-old Priya testified before this chamber about this bill. Chair Stewart called her testimony “the best I’ve seen all year.” Today, Priya is back in her fourth-grade classroom, and when we tell her that this funding was omitted, she will be really disappointed. I’m here as a member of the Junior League of Columbus, seeking answers about why we’ll have to deliver this extremely sad news. Our League has been working with numerous Ohioans to champion this bill for years, and we would like some answers.

My name is Julia Marino. I’m a post-doctoral scholar at The Ohio State in National Security Studies, hoping to become a history professor. My work centers on American political history, especially on how states took the lead in investing in education and workforce training throughout the 1980s and 1990s to bolster their international competitiveness.

My faith in the power of state government has been strengthened since moving to Columbus, and I have been inspired to see your legislative body in action. More broadly, I often tell friends and family in New York how struck I am by the sense of community here in Columbus—how people in this city really seem to look out for one another.

In my brief testimony, I’d like to highlight three areas:

1. The Foster-to-College Scholarship Bill
2. The urgency of passing it
3. Some questions we have at the Junior League about what we can do moving forward

First, The Foster-to-College Bill.

Core to the Junior League’s mission here in Columbus is to help youth transition out of foster care. Whether through community service, mentoring, or fundraising, we want these young people in our city to have every opportunity we’d want for our own children.

Through my role on the Junior League’s advocacy team, I’ve witnessed how many people—both inside this Chamber, and in the League, and inspiring people throughout Columbus—have fought for this bill with unwavering dedication for years. It’s really inspiring.

I’ve met amazing people like Jay Brown, who aged out of foster care in her second semester at the University of Cincinnati, was forced to drop out, and ended up homeless. As she recounted to the House Children’s Committee a few weeks ago: “I’ve slept in my car, gone days without a shower, missed meals, and went hungry...all while being a single mom, working multiple jobs.” Yet she still graduated at the top of her class, joining the 3% of former foster youth who earn a bachelor’s degree.

I have also met Adam Hassan, a Columbus State student who walks two hours each way to attend classes. I encourage you to read his testimony—along with Jay’s and Priya’s and thirteen others—which we’ve submitted for the record. After I met Adam, he texted me, told me that he found my work interesting, and asked if we could meet to discuss his interest in History and Theology as he plans to pursue a Bachelor’s Degree. I’ve taught students before, and this kind of initiative is rare. I would love to teach a student like Adam.

I think the American Dream depends, in part, on ensuring we don’t forget children who have no parents to advocate for them.

Second, Why the Bill Is Important Now.

As you all know, we live in polarized times, but it has been moving to see so many Ohioans, of varied political stripes, roll up their sleeves to advocate for foster youth. When I talk about contemporary politics to friends back home, I tell them about meeting so many people of faith and people of goodwill who set aside their differences to stand up for these young people.

Democracy flourishes when it delivers—when citizens see that their government can work on their behalf.

Yet, it's easy to lose heart when something like HB25 is left out of the budget. But democracy also requires persistence.

In the third part of my testimony, I'd like to ask you a few questions.

1. Why isn't the bill advancing, given its bipartisan support? Education has historically united both sides. In my research, states led by both Republican and Democratic governors have embraced investment in education as a cornerstone of economic competitiveness.
2. Why is the bill not advancing, especially when Representative Andrea White has noted that it would save Ohio money in the long run? The numbers are clear: half of those who experience homelessness have spent time in foster care. Every other homeless person who I pass in my neighborhood, the Short North, I wonder whether they would be there if they had had the means to pursue higher education. Why, if it makes such financial sense—and aligns with what 35 other states already provide—are we leaving it out?
3. If this bill truly has such broad support, why is it missing from the budget? The Junior League has organized meetings where current former foster youth share their stories—stories that reveal how vital this legislation is for Ohio's foster youth. Whose endorsement do we need to secure to make sure this happens either this year or in a future year?
4. If, despite all this, the bill still fails, how else can we help students we meet through our Junior League service programs attend college? We're a non-partisan volunteer group eager to partner with you in this work and to support government efforts. Any guidance you can offer would be invaluable.

After Priya testified last week, she spoke for several minutes with a representative in the hallway. Before they parted, she asked, "I was just wondering if you were looking to adopt anyone?" I am twenty-nine, and I am still finding the courage to ask questions and advocate for what I believe in. As I was weighing whether to testify today, Priya's hope, boldness, and perseverance were an inspiration to me. We have so much to learn from children like Priya, and I hope you'll remember her voice when weighing what this bill might achieve.

Thank you for your time, for your commitment to the state of Ohio, and for hearing these stories. I urge you to please reconsider adding HB 25 into the House Budget Bill.