



House Workforce and Higher Education Committee Testimony
Nichole Smith - Regional Vice President East End Community Services by WestCare Ohio
May 6, 2025

Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and members of the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of House Bill 25.

My name is Nichole Smith, and I serve as Regional Vice President at East End Community Services by WestCare Ohio, a nonprofit organization located in East Dayton. Since 1998, our mission has been to foster opportunity and strengthen families through a whole-family approach that supports the success of children, youth, and caregivers.

House Bill 25 is a powerful step toward expanding access and success in higher education for young people with lived experience in foster care or kinship care. The bill establishes the Foster-to-College Scholarship Program and invests in school-based liaisons and student navigators—roles that will play a vital part in helping these youth access, afford, and thrive in postsecondary education. East End strongly supports this legislation.

In our community, the promise and potential of young people is tremendous. East Dayton is a place of deep-rooted strength, where neighbors look out for one another and families work every day to overcome barriers. Many of the youth we serve bring with them experiences in foster care, juvenile court systems, or kinship care arrangements. They are determined, capable, and full of potential—but they often face a more complex path to adulthood. These young people persevere through frequent transitions, financial limitations, shifts in caregiving, and the emotional weight of early life challenges—yet they continue to show up, work hard, and aspire to brighter futures.

What's too often missing is the sustained support to help them transition successfully to adulthood. When students lack consistent adult guidance, the journey to college can be daunting—navigating the FAFSA, understanding admissions processes, and managing the cost of tuition, housing, and daily living expenses. Even highly motivated students can be sidelined by logistical and financial obstacles.

That's why House Bill 25 matters. The Foster-to-College Scholarship Program will not only reduce the financial burden through a last-dollar structure, but more importantly, it embeds trusted adults into the process. These student navigators and liaisons will serve as bridge-builders across schools, public agencies, and colleges—ensuring no student has to navigate this journey alone.

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East End Community Services is a 501(c)(3) organization (EIN #31-1508554).

At East End, we see every day how transformational it is when families are surrounded by the right supports. Our whole-family coaching model pairs caregivers with trained coaches who help them build stability, set goals, and strengthen family bonds. Our youth programs offer tutoring, enrichment, mentorship, and career exploration—fostering leadership and confidence in the next generation. This dual-generation approach empowers families to thrive together and lays the foundation for long-term community wellness. HB 25 aligns beautifully with this vision by extending meaningful support into a critical stage of young people’s lives.

We’re especially heartened to see the inclusion of youth in noncertified kinship care. Increasingly, children are being raised by grandparents or extended family members who step up in extraordinary ways, often without formal supports. Recognizing their caregiving and making these students eligible for scholarships is a testament to both compassion and common sense. Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and members of the committee: thank you for seeing the strength in these young people and believing in their potential. We urge your support of House Bill 25 as a meaningful investment in Ohio’s future.

We also thank Representatives Jarrells and Ray for their leadership in championing this legislation and centering youth with lived experience in policy solutions.

Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Nichole Smith, Regional Vice President
East End Community Services by WestCare Ohio