

House Higher Education Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 25
Michael Outrich
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Thank you, Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and members of the House Higher Education Committee for the opportunity to testify. I am here to express my strong support for House Bill 25, the Foster-to-College Scholarship Act.

My name is Michael Outrich. I am a foster care alumnus with the organization Alumni of Care Together Improving Outcomes Now (ACTION Ohio) and a former member of the Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio (OHIO YAB) Youth Advisory Board.

It has been my honor as a former foster youth to establish a program at Ohio University to support students with a history of out-of-home placement, including foster care, kinship care, and adoption. Both my personal experiences and those of my peers I assisted through their undergraduate studies inform my perspective on this program.

While I was living in a group home and attending high school, I always aspired to attend college. I had no understanding of scholarships or what the financial costs of college might be... I just knew that if I wanted to become an urban planner, it required at least a four-year bachelor's degree.

My high school guidance counselors did not have the time or knowledge to proactively share resources such as Education Training Vouchers, which exist to support foster youth in pursuing higher education. Although the federal Every Student Succeeds Act requires school districts throughout the nation to identify a District Foster Care Liaison to support students in grades K–12, more training and a standard procedure for local school district liaisons is needed, particularly at the high school level.

As House Bill 25 proposes, establishing a full-time School Foster Care Liaison within the Ohio Department of Education is an excellent step forward. This position will play an integral role in developing and sharing standardized training and expectations. Its leadership can help ensure that individuals designated on paper as ESSA Liaisons truly are knowledgeable about foster-care-related resources and have the time and capacity to properly assist foster care youth.

Likewise, creating the Foster-to-College Scholarship Program to support the post-secondary success of students with a foster care history will create a ripple effect of improved outcomes, including college retention and avoidance of unnecessary debts.

When I was accepted by Ohio University, the group home manager drove me down to drop me off and say his final goodbyes. He said, "Now begins that next chapter of your life—make the most of it." And then he left. I wasn't sure what to do next. I had my class syllabus and my schedule, and that was pretty much it. No guidance or support. So, I supported myself, and ultimately developed a campus program to help others: the Ohio Reach Scholars program at Ohio University.

But in that moment, for me—as with so many other students with a foster care history—I felt incredibly alone. There was so much that I didn't know. A few weeks into the semester, I received a notice that I needed to see the financial aid officer due to a tuition shortfall. I was told that I was short \$10,000 and that I needed to take out some additional loans as part of my financial aid package. As a freshman who was never previously introduced to the concept of credit or loans, I signed the promissory note so I could continue my classes. It wasn't until two years later that I began to realize what I was getting myself into. I had borrowed over \$35,000 by then, with a mix of subsidized and unsubsidized loans. It was time to move off campus and, because

I did not have a cosigner, I was required to pay a full year's rent up front to secure an apartment. To avoid taking on more debt, I lived on a shoestring budget, skipping meals, handwashing my clothes, and focusing only on work and school. Throughout this time, I remained on the Dean's list and worked as a part-time undergraduate researcher.

I wouldn't wish that life on anyone, especially former foster youth who already face limited resources and childhood trauma. I was fortunate to have mentors offering words of encouragement. I did not want to be another statistic, and I worked hard to prove wrong all of those who said I would never amount to anything. As of today, I have attained a Master's degree in Urban Planning from The Ohio State University and a Bachelor's degree in Geographic Science from Ohio University. But the road to this destination has been rocky and difficult. I want better for today's youth.

If the Foster-to-College Scholarship Program had been available at the time, it would have provided "last dollar" support after my grants and scholarships were applied. It would have saved me debt and given me significant peace of mind.

Creating the Foster-to-College Scholarship Program will significantly improve post-secondary outcomes for students with a foster and kinship care history. With support, higher education outcomes for our population can and do improve, as exemplified by the recent graduation rate of students in the Columbus State Network of 50% (in contrast to the national rate of 5%). This particular support is vital for the matriculation, retention, and graduation of former foster youth.

In closing, we respectfully request that you vote "yes" on House Bill 25, the Foster-to-College Scholarship Act. Thank you for your consideration of this important program and for your time.