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Interested Party Testimony
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Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony today on Substitute House Bill 25, the Foster-to-College Scholarship Act. My name is Julia Marino, and I am the advocacy team leader for the Junior League of Columbus.

First, thank you: this substitute bill reflects the hard work and critical thinking needed to make change possible. Upon receiving the revised bill over the weekend, we were struck at the careful effort legislators on this Committee, the Legislative Service Commission, and agency stakeholders have clearly put into improving it since the spring of 2025.

As you know, House Bill 25 was initially introduced three legislative sessions ago and passed in the last General Assembly 85-5. Over the last several years, dozens of foster youth alumni, advocates, and professionals in education and child welfare have provided testimony.

This bill is a team effort, as Representative Jarrells told a zoom call of volunteers back in March: "this is not my bill, it is not Representative Ray's bill, it is our bill"—a bill all Ohioans can proudly support. Above all, it is a bill that belongs to Ohio's foster youth.

For this reason, I encourage you to speak with the foster youth who will reach out and ask to meet with you to share their feedback and ideas in the coming weeks. In Ohio, we have a thriving student-led leadership movement known as Youth Advisory Boards—student governments active in each county, where foster youth discuss, shape, and advocate on issues that directly affect them. Over the years, these young leaders have regularly testified on this bill, and they have spent the summer developing concrete suggestions and feedback they're eager to share with you. They deeply appreciate your dedication and the attention you've given to these issues. They're an incredible group of students—thoughtful, tenacious, and full of ideas—and I know many of you have already had the chance to meet them.

For my part, I would like to briefly highlight why passing this bill is both necessary and urgent.

At Mass on Sunday just two blocks from here, we heard the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The priest called attention to the extraordinary act of forgiveness that Erika Kirk offered to her husband Charlie's killer. For Erika Kirk, like John Paul II who also forgave his would-be assassin, understood through her faith that, even amid life's most devastating circumstances, love

is the only meaningful response. And as Elie Wiesel reminded us, the opposite of love is not hate—it is indifference. It was indifference, the priest observed, that Jesus was calling out in his parable.

When this bill failed to make it into the legislature's budget back in June, I will admit, some of us advocates thought – and we were wrong – that legislators in this body were indifferent. Indifferent to the 25% of foster youth who become homeless within four years of aging out of the state's care.[1] Indifferent to the 50% of our nation's population of homeless once spent time in foster care.[2] And indifferent to the dismal 60% high school graduation/GED rate in Ohio for foster youth by the age of 21, which leads us to rank in the bottom ten percent on this metric among all states.[3]

But when we read this bill over the weekend, we realized that that legislature does care. Your work demonstrates genuine commitment to helping foster youth succeed and giving them hope beyond the hardships of their childhood.

In the parable I mentioned (the one about Lazarus), Jesus took the time to give Lazarus a name. He's the only person – in all of Jesus' parables – who had a name. This poor, sick beggar had a name because he mattered. Our 16,000+ -foster youth in Ohio have names, too. And as your hard work on this bill shows, you know they have names, and you know they matter.

I can't tell you all their stories, but I know you have heard from them a lot over the last three General Assemblies! The thousands of foster youth who will benefit from this bill may not have been able to attend today, given school and work commitments. But when you get the chance to meet with them, and when you pass this bill and watch them graduate with a post-secondary degree or credential, their achievements will astonish you.

As the priest at St. Joseph's Cathedral said this weekend: "let us shake off indifference so that we may all make a difference." Let's help Ohio's foster youth achieve their goals – we are grateful for your leadership and would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.

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[1] National Foster Youth Institute, *Housing & Homelessness* (NFYI website), accessed September 29, 2025. https://nfyi.org/issues/homelessness-2

[2] National Foster Youth Institute, *Housing & Homelessness* (NFYI website), accessed September 29, 2025. https://nfyi.org/issues/homelessness-2

[3] Marty Schladen, "Ohio Is Lagging Badly in Some Foster-Care Measures. Reforms Suggested," *Ohio Capital Journal*, April 1, 2022, accessed September 29, 2025, https://ohiocapitaljournal.com/2022/04/01/ohio-is-lagging-badly-in-some-foster-care-measures-reforms-suggested/