

House Workforce & Higher Education Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 25
Julia Marino
Junior League of Columbus, Advocacy Team
May 14, 2025

Thank you, Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the House Higher Education Committee for the opportunity to testify. I am here to express my strong support for Senate Bill 13, the Foster-to-College Scholarship Act, and its inclusion in House Bill 96, the Ohio operating budget.

My name is Julia Marino. I recently completed my Ph.D. and am now a post-doctoral scholar in National Security Studies at The Ohio State University. I'm here today as a Junior League volunteer.

Last year, I moved to Columbus and joined the Junior League's advocacy team. On March 5th, I attended my first House budget hearing and heard foster youth Jay Brown, Adam Hassan, and Michael Outrich share their stories. I encourage you to watch the video on our website, <https://www.fostertocollegeohio.org>

Before attending that hearing, I knew little about foster-care policy. I left in awe of these foster youth alumni's resilience and accomplishments.

I felt awe and respect, too, for the Representatives whose kindness and compassion that day reminded me that some issues truly transcend partisanship.

The hearing also fell on Ash Wednesday. During Mass my priest urged us to "Pray about where your gifts meet the needs of your community." My new Junior League friends had just told me I was good at filing the paperwork for witness testimonies. Maybe, I thought, I could work on that.

I had a great K-12 education, where college was always a given for me—the path was clear and supported. But many foster youth face obstacles most of us can barely imagine. This bill isn't about pity; it's about potential. It sends a clear message to every Ohio foster youth: "You have endured more than most people will endure in a lifetime. You are valued, and Ohio needs your talent, resilience, and gifts."

Let me illustrate the hope this bill brings. After ten-year-old Priya Gajmier testified, I encouraged her to share her video with her school. She responded, "My school is crazy. Yesterday, a fifth-grader stabbed a kid in the eye with a chair. There was blood everywhere—his eye, like, exploded." Yet caring adults immediately surrounded Priya with support. Her foster mom assured her, "You're one of the strongest people I know; you'll be a great nurse one day to take care of kids like him." Representative Baker, herself a nurse, invited Priya to shadow her in Cincinnati. I have seen how this bill is already broadening horizons and providing genuine hope.

HB 25 is designed as a pilot program. We understand concerns about long-term costs and will review outcomes, adjust funding, and ensure effectiveness after two years. We understand the importance of careful monitoring and accountability.

Back to Priya. Later that morning after her testimony, Priya asked someone, "Are you looking to adopt anyone?" Her question really stuck with me, I think about it daily

This brings me to my final main point: how this bill will encourage adoption and promote strong families.

Two of the bill's strongest proponents—the Adoption Network of Cleveland and the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption—support HB 25 because it encourages families to adopt teenagers.

I think about someone like Priya, whose parents recently passed away.

If she stays in foster care for two more years, knowing her post-secondary education would be fully covered, as it would be if this bill passes, could make all the difference to a potential adoptive parent.

Ultimately, programs like this one - combined with raising public awareness about foster youth's challenges - can help Ohio transition from the bottom 10% in outcomes to the top 10%. We can show the nation what's possible when our state, when our communities, come together.

Thank you for your time. I welcome your questions, particularly on existing financial aid, vocational programs, navigator roles, and eligibility specifics.