

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for this opportunity to offer interested party testimony about HB 96, Ohio's Budget Bill. I am asking that the Foster to College Scholarship be included in the budget. My name is Jaleshia Brown. I am a former foster youth. I spent 11 years in foster care and aged out of the system at 18. My emancipation took place without me, without my knowledge, and without any transitional planning. I was emancipated while in Dayton trying to pursue higher education. During my second semester, I was kicked out of my dorm and school. I reached out to my case worker afterwards and learned that I had been emancipated and was no longer in foster care. This was my first episode of homelessness. This was the beginning of my post-secondary education journey.

Ohio ranks in the bottom 10% nationally for foster youth outcomes in areas such as high school graduation, employment, and post-secondary enrollment. This significantly increases the chances of poverty, arrest, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, and homelessness. The Foster-to-College Scholarship Act makes post-secondary education more accessible to a vulnerable population. Not only will this provide funding for tuition, fees, and other costs that aren't covered by existing state and federal funding, but it also includes a foster care liaison—a knowledgeable, supportive person who will help youth navigate through college, identify and remove barriers, while encouraging them along the way.

It took me almost a decade to obtain a four-year degree. I continued to hit every wall year after year as I continued my post-secondary education journey. I experienced teenage pregnancy, homelessness, domestic violence, depression, lack of support, guidance, and hope. I've slept in my car, missed days of showering, missed meals, and went hungry. I struggled with self-medicating and substance use. I faced these challenges while being a single mom, working multiple jobs. I did not only experience these obstacles; I survived them. I graduated top of my class with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and a certification in violence prevention. I am part of the 3% of former foster youth to obtain a four-year degree, but again, it took almost a decade. The Foster-to-College Scholarship Act will make these journeys easier and shorter for future foster youth and will increase graduation rates.

Good parents ensure their children reach essential milestones: finish high school, pursue further education or training, and achieve stable employment. Currently, the State—as the legal guardian for 16,000 children in care—is falling short. HB 96 offers the State an opportunity to fulfill its responsibility and, at minimum, act as a supportive parent.

When foster youth are given a fair opportunity, they give back to their communities. Many of us choose careers in service and leadership precisely because we understand what it means to need support. Investing in Ohio's former foster youth now will decrease the millions of dollars in the future, that is currently spent on former foster youth through incarceration, chronic homelessness and shelters, and public assistance. As foster youth thrive, they will multiply the

impact of the State's initial investment. Invest in Ohio's foster youth and they will invest back in Ohio. I'm proof of it.

Every young person is just one caring adult away from becoming a success story, and those stories can begin with each of you. Together we can create a different narrative, one where every child can thrive. You have the remarkable chance to be the caring adults who transform the lives of hundreds—perhaps thousands—of current and future foster youth. By doing so, you're not just providing support; you're building a bridge—a bridge to better outcomes and brighter futures. Thank you.