

Senate Health Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 96
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Thank you, Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Senate Health Committee, for the opportunity to testify today. I am here to express my strong support for including funding for Senate Bill 13, the Foster-to-College Scholarship Program, in House Bill 96. My name is Caidyn Bearfield, and I am a former foster youth and current student at The Ohio State University. I am very grateful to have the platform and privilege to speak with my legislators today. For context, I was in foster care as a teenager and have spent my entire adult life participating in organizations that serve current and former foster youth. It is not just my personal experience, but also the experiences of my community that inform my testimony today.

In 2023, I graduated from Columbus State Community College with a two-year degree that took me four years to complete. While there's nothing wrong with this, issues such as housing insecurity impaired my ability to be a "traditional student." Financial issues heavily impact my community, and those with lived experience in the child welfare system tend to experience more stress and less support with daily living expenses—let alone schooling. Funding education can only be considered when housing, utilities, regular meals, and clothing are already covered. I was able to graduate Columbus State due to pandemic and emergency funding, which no longer exists. This makes me very nervous for students today who no longer have access to that last-dollar support. I would like to change that.

Funding the Foster-to-College Scholarship Program through House Bill 96 would provide hope and the means to a better future for Ohioans who have experienced foster care by ensuring access to free tuition, room, and board. No one should have to choose between meeting their present needs and setting themselves up for success in the future. Many former foster youth (and other low-income populations) have faced this difficult question: Do I want to pay my bills or continue going to school? With the rising cost of necessities over the last couple of years, it is inevitable that more and more people will face this dilemma. In many cases, it is this same dilemma that prevents them from being able to begin their schooling.

I wholeheartedly believe that every human being is entitled to the means to support themselves. This is not about "hand-outs." It is about enabling a strong foundation so that we can support ourselves without relying on assistance programs for the rest of our lives, so that we are not living paycheck-to-paycheck, and so that our talents are not dampened by skipping meals and the stress of survival. The more impoverished we become, the harder it is to climb back out due to the accumulative stress and consequences of a lifestyle of struggle. If we are supported fully and early in our lives, then we are set up to support ourselves and our families for the rest of our lives.

To quote the Children's Defense Fund, "Ohio ranks near the bottom of the country for young adults who were in foster care...reaching their potential...40% lack a high school diploma, more than half were unemployed at age 21, and more than 1 in 3 experienced homelessness." When

youth do not believe they are likely to succeed, even if they try their best, the lack of hope and security can cloud judgment and lead to behavioral issues.

I spent over a year in congregate care facilities, specifically targeted for youth with behavioral and mental health issues. I can promise you that a leading cause of behavioral and mental health issues stems from a feeling of hopelessness that feels inescapable. This stems from a lack of resources to live a stable, safe life. I don't want my community to keep fighting for our lives to have our basic human needs met—this is stifling our potential in the time it consumes and the exhaustion it produces. It would be an enormous game-changer to have known that if I could just make it through this hard time, I would have the means at the end of it to create a better life for myself. I truly believe that if more teens in care knew that the Foster-to-College Scholarship Program would help them reach their potential, we would not only see high school graduation numbers climb, but also see declines in self-harm, suicide attempts, and overdoses among current and former foster youth.

I am 23 years old, and I cannot count the friends and kids I grew up with who have passed away on my fingers. These numbers are terrifying, and it is beyond heartbreaking the danger that youth will put themselves through when they feel they have no other options. This is, however, preventable. It is imperative that funding is specifically and directly allocated toward tuition, room, and board for foster care alumni. Suggesting that former foster youth rely on existing scholarship and grant options simply does not consider the reality of the circumstances that foster youth have faced. When I was in care, we only had school for three hours a day. I was supposed to be a sophomore and was in the same classroom as kids who were supposed to be in seventh grade and those who were supposed to be high school seniors. There were zero options for extracurricular activities or honors programs. When I returned to public school, I was years behind my peers, and there was nothing that I could do about it. Even though I have an associate's degree, I still lack a high school education and find myself playing catch-up. Many teens in care switch schools multiple times and/or experience similar subpar schooling in the facilities they reside in. Meanwhile, no one has a happy story about entering the child welfare system. Countless studies validate the cognitive and memory issues that arise from trauma, especially recurring trauma—which many foster youth experience. These educational disadvantages occur during a time when we are both processing trauma and when our brains are still developing. For these reasons, competitive scholarships and grants that require high GPAs and participation in extracurricular activities are often out of reach for us.

Housing and other basic needs are already paramount concerns for youth exiting the child welfare system. By providing full rides, not only would every foster alum have a safe, indoor place to sleep and eat meals, but they would also be equipped with the resources to provide this for themselves in the future. My community has been through a lot, and we deserve to be invested in. I have seen time and time again that when someone is able to get on their feet, they choose to serve their communities, and this positive momentum compounds. Please, invest in our futures and give us a fighting chance at independence without more interim trauma. I think that you will be amazed at the good things we are capable of when our circumstances allow us to thrive. In closing, we respectfully request that you vote "yes" on Senate Bill 13, the Foster-to-College Scholarship Act. Thank you for your consideration of this important program and for your time.