

**Senate Health Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 96
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Hamilton County Youth Advisory Board, Foster Youth Alumna
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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 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. Invest in Ohio's foster youth, and we will invest in Ohio. I'm the proof!

Representative Sharon Ray recently compared HB 25 to the original GI Bill that transformed veterans' lives after World War II. Her analogy resonates deeply with me. Our veterans fought abroad; foster youth have fought quiet battles at home—against the opioid crisis, chronic disinvestment, and family instability. We did not choose these battles, yet we bear their scars. Just as the GI Bill recognized service and sacrifice “through no fault of their own,” HB 25 acknowledges the resilience of youth who have survived their own front lines.

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 25 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. As former foster youth thrive, they mentor younger kids in care and strengthen neighborhoods, multiplying the impact of the State's initial investment.

This provision was already highly favored in the House, boasting 58 co-sponsors and an impressive vote of 84 in favor of HB 184, with only three opposing voices. 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 has the opportunity to 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.

In closing, we respectfully request that the Committee include funding for Senate Bill 13's Foster-to-College Scholarship Program in House Bill 96. Thank you for your consideration of this important program and for your time.