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Senate Judiciary Committee
HB 4 – Proponent Testimony
January 25, 2022

Good afternoon, Chairman Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding House Bill 4.

My name is Todd Brooklyn, and I serve as a Youth Ambassador for the Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board. I am here today to read testimony on behalf of Lisa Dickson, Communications Chair for ACTION Ohio.

I am 19 years old and I have been involved with statewide efforts to establish a Youth Ombudsman Office for youth who are experiencing abuse in their biological, foster, adoptive, kinship, respite, residential and group home placements so that their concerns can be independently investigated. This includes participating in Interested Party meetings with legislators and ongoing virtual meetings with ODJFS.

I will now read Lisa's testimony:

I am pleased today to offer proponent testimony for House Bill 4. At its heart, this bill is about creating a conduit for better communication between law enforcement and public children service agencies, to prevent child abuse cases from falling between the cracks.

This is a great next step for the state of Ohio, because, prior to March 2019, Ohio was the only state in the nation that didn't include police officers on its list of mandated reporters. At the time, Ohio foster care youth and alumni were deeply concerned about this, and it was our honor to testify previously in favor of House Bill 137 which amended Ohio Revised Code to make Ohio officers mandatory reporters of abuse and neglect.

As a former foster youth who experienced physical abuse as a child, for many years without intervention, I can testify that experiencing abuse as a child and as a teenager not only makes you immediately unsafe – it makes you feel powerless and invisible. Experiencing abuse without intervention from the adults in their lives sends children and teens a dooming message about their worth and what to expect from other people.

It matters deeply that existing safeguards are failing Ohio youth when they reach out for help. It matters that child abuse hotlines are often unresponsive to their needs. It matters that some crisis shelters have become so full due to the pandemic that youth are being turned away. It matters that youth who run away from abusive placements are often sent back to them.

This makes me all the more grateful to Representatives Manchester and Plummer for their responsiveness to Ohio youth's request for a Youth Ombudsman to respond to young people who reach out to safety concerns and rights violations.

On behalf of the OHIO YAB and ACTION Ohio, I want to express heartfelt gratitude for the responsiveness demonstrated in pages 27-28 of Amendment #134-2057-02 to House Bill 4, which reflect that:



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1. **A Youth Ombudsman** will be appointed by the Governor with advice from the Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board (OHIO YAB) to investigate complaints made by youth.
2. **The role of the Youth Ombudsman** will be to respond to complaints initiated by youth and youth adults. This role will be separate from role of the Family Ombudsman, who will respond to complaints initiated by an adult, such as a resource parent, biological parent, or caseworker.
3. **The Youth Ombudsman shall prepare an annual report** that is evaluated by members of the Youth Advisory Board. The OHIO YAB's evaluation will be presented to the Governor within 60 days of the release of the report and may include recommendations for changes in operational practices based on youth experience.

Having a youth-specific office matters because children and teens who are experiencing abuse need to be heard. Lessons learned from other states demonstrate that Ombudsman offices that try to serve youth and adults at the same time end up primarily serving adults, and that trying to serve these two populations simultaneously creates a conflict of interest when children or teens report being abused by a caregiver.

Including the voices of those with lived experience matters. Today's youth are more than just passive recipients of programs, services, tools and resources. They can and should be involved in design, delivery and evaluation. With that in mind, I encourage each of you to direct any questions you might have to Todd. In Todd's own words: *"This is an office that should not be taken lightly. This is an office that I wish I had when I was younger."*

Many thanks to each of you for caring about Ohio youth who have experienced complex trauma due to being entrusted to unsafe placements. Thank you for caring about children and teens who have lost their lives due to lack of protection. Thank you for moving forward to create this resource for youth to reach out to for help without fear of retaliation.

Chairman Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you once again for this opportunity to provide testimony regarding House Bill 4.

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