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House Committee on Financial Services
Subcommittee on Housing and Insurance

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Proponent testimony on:

The Amended Version of H.R. 2069, the Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act

Chairman Duffy, Vice Chairman Ross, Ranking Member Cleaver, and members of the committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony on the amended version of H.R. 2069, the Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act.

My name is Lisa Dickson. As a former foster youth, I wish that I could be there in person to share how much this matters, and the potential this bill has to improve outcomes after foster care. More importantly, I wish you could hear directly from the young people themselves, in and from foster care, who have worked for six years to make this bill a reality.

I am contacting you on behalf of two volunteer organizations. The OHIO Youth Advisory Board serves as the statewide voice of foster care youth, ages 14 and older. ACTION Ohio is an alumni group of adults who experienced foster care personally, and who dedicate our time to improve outcomes for the next generation. Our two groups have been working together since 2006 to make a difference, side-by-side.

Young people enter foster care due to factors outside of their control, such as experiencing neglect, abuse or disconnection from a parent to due to death, incarceration or substance abuse challenges. As foster youth, we do not choose the family that we are born into - we can only make our own choices. In the midst of family upheaval, all we can do is seek to survive the moment at hand, and figure out how to build our future. We often feel alone in this struggle - especially when throughout the nation, over 20,000 youth "age out" of the system every year, and strive to build successful lives.

Leaving home and moving out on your own as a young adult is a milestone that many young people look forward to. But for young people in foster care, this experience often catapults them into an immediate struggle for survival. We want to attain self-sufficiency, and the most important and pressing question is: "Where am I going to live?" Having a stable residence is critical when it comes to pursuing employment and higher education.

Imagine being a teen in foster care who is getting ready to enter into young adulthood. You have no savings account, and no parental co-signer to move into an apartment. You worked really hard to get into college, but the dorms are closed on holiday breaks - so, the irony is that while everyone else is celebrating with their family, you don't know where you are going to sleep that night.

I don't have to imagine that, because I was one of those young people. When I aged out of foster care in 1989, there was no plan for my future. I had to figure out that path on my own. Thanks to support from an Admissions Counselor at the University of Kentucky named Randy Mills, I entered college at 16 years old. But I ended up homeless within a year. I continued to pursue college, even as I struggled to find an affordable place to live. I found a home in a Methodist dorm called the Wesley Foundation. With stable housing, I was able to complete college and graduate school, working up to five part-time jobs at a time. Since then, I've been working as a full-time librarian for 19 years. It's my honor to work hard, pay taxes, and seek to "pay it forward" for the next generation.

But that was back in 1989 – so why is the Foster Care to Homeless Pipeline still so prevalent today? Our nation has moved forward in so many other areas since the time when I was in foster care. The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act set a time limit for how long children should languish in foster care limbo before seeking to terminate parental rights. The 1999 Foster Care Independence Act established Chafee funding and independent living classes. The 2008 Fostering Connections Act provided states with the option to extend foster care supports until age 21.

And yet, housing remains the biggest missing piece after foster care. Research demonstrates the pervasiveness of this struggle. Chapin Hall’s longitudinal Midwest research study reveals that 36% of former foster youth experience homelessness before turning 26 years old. In a recent national survey conducted by Child Trends, states were asked to report the primary area in which they could do better to support young people transitioning from foster care. Not surprisingly, housing was the area most commonly marked as in need of improvement.

We have the numbers, and we have the data - what our nation needs is a sense of urgency about this problem. While children are in foster care, the Children’s Bureau measures each states’ success in caring for them by three categories: Safety, Permanence and Well-Being. But if we care about the safety of our children, it should matter to us that when they “age out” into homelessness, they are at risk of trafficking and many other negative outcomes. If we care about permanence, we need to recognize that there is nothing more impermanent than not having a stable address. If we care about well being, then we need to acknowledge the dreams, talents and aspirations of our youth – and that helping them successfully launch into adulthood benefits not only them personally, but also our nation. Given the chance to contribute to society, please know that we can and will give back.

The Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act is thoughtful and intentional. It is based on the premise that we already know where teens in foster care are placed, and that we can connect them with existing housing supports by putting them on the list early. This bill is youth-driven in every sense – because the very reason it exists is that a volunteer group of Ohio foster youth and alumni have been fundraising locally and then traveling to D.C. to advocate for the past six years about the national gap that exists between foster care and housing.

We are not lobbyists or paid staff members. We are current and former foster youth ourselves - and this is an issue that deeply matters to us. We demonstrate how much we care by volunteering our time to help others. Even as we travel to D.C. annually to advocate for this need, on a volunteer basis, we each continue to pursue work, college and opportunities to give back to the community - because that’s what matters most to each of us. Our goal is to work hard, move forward and care for the next generation.

I urge you to pass this bill. The price tag is literally nothing. This is no-cost opportunity to improve outcomes for my brothers and sisters in and from foster care.

Thank you for your time. Please know that I am and will remain available for any questions.

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