



**My name is Cloe Cooper.** I am a foster alumni, a member of ACTION Ohio and a Student Coordinator for the Columbus State Scholar Network. I would like to start by thanking Governor DeWine for caring about children in state care and the outcomes of those who transition out of care into adulthood. I think it is extremely impressive that Governor DeWine choose to have foster alumni on his committee for improvement and I think that youth voice should always have a seat at the table when making decisions in regard to their care and resources.

**I am not the type of person who likes to talk about the poor experiences** of my childhood and teen years. However, given that this particular platform encourages those like myself to do so, I would like to share not the details of my experiences but rather that the horrific things I experienced in residential facilities as a teen in the custody of Franklin County Children services continues to give me night terrors as an adult.

**While I will not go into detail about the things I witnessed and endured,** I will say that what haunts me the most is the feeling of helplessness I embodied as I tried to help myself and my sisters in care make it through our daily lives. Fearing repercussion, there are countless incidents that went unreported. Those that were, were swept under the rug, or myself and my sisters were severely punished as a result of speaking our truth. 3 of the 4 residential facilities I was placed in are no longer operational. 2 of the 3 were shut down due to the mistreatment of its residents.

**With that being said, I stand here today and say with every ounce of confidence in my body that it is imperative to the wellness of children in care that the State of Ohio have a Foster Care Ombudsman.** The mental, emotional and physical health of children in care will remain at risk if there is no neutral outlet for reports to be made in the event of neglect or abuse. Providing a safeguard and emotional wellbeing to those whose lives are entrusted to the foster care system will help prevent mental and physical illness and the number of AWOL children, those of which are at all time high risk for Human Trafficking. In addition, I think that it is important that youth have their own Ombudsman office separate from one that cares for foster parents because the two needs will likely come into conflict and potentially make youth reports futile.

**In addition to the need for a Foster Care Ombudsman,** I would like to bring attention to the need of preparation for young adulthood, especially in Residential Facilities. Programming for independent living skills should be the same across the board in all county agencies to ensure that everyone has equal opportunity to gain skills regardless of their placement location. It should be mandated that these programs are provided consistently in every county and private agency. In my personal experience, the opportunity to gain independent living skills was scarce. I was placed out of county and programming for me was hours away in Franklin County. Due to lack of programming in the facility I was placed, and unwillingness from staff members and county caseworkers to transport me where it was provided, I aged out of a residential facility in 2012 and had no idea how to take care of myself.

**One of the biggest barriers I faced was finding and paying for safe and stable housing.** I did not have the knowledge I needed, and no freedom beforehand to earn the means required to take care of myself. Although I had immediately begun pursuing higher education when I aged out of care, having little support ultimately resulted in homelessness and dropping out of school.

**Had it not been for finally securing stable housing for myself,** The Columbus State Scholar Network, the support they provided me and the resources I was put in touch with because of my involvement in the program, I don't know if I would be giving my testimony here today. I do know that I would not be on track to graduate at the end of this semester, and I surely wouldn't be in the position I am to advocate for better

outcomes for my brothers and sisters in care and transitioning into adulthood. I have said this before, and I will say it again and again and again to anyone who is willing to listen.

**If former foster youth are given the chance and platform to be successful,** the benefits to the nation's economy, communities and policy improvements are immeasurable. All they need is the opportunity.

**There is a chance here to give current foster youth their voice and an opportunity to live their lives happily and healthy.** I have faith in our shared commitment to improvement. I look forward to seeing what achievements the future holds for our young people in and transitioning out of care.

Thank you for your time and dedication.