



Governor DeWine, children services representatives, and fellow foster care alumni, let me begin by expressing my sincere gratitude for your displayed interest in providing foster care services that result in positive outcomes. I would also like to thank Children Services Transformation Advisory Council for hosting this series of invaluable forums.

My name is Gabriella Craft and I am a foster youth alumnus of Franklin County and an Ohio-Licensed, Masters level Social Worker. I have spent the past decade providing care to individuals in the community suffering with mental health and addiction disorders. Both my personal and professional experiences have afforded insights in challenges faced by many foster youths. I would like to briefly share these challenges and provide suggestions to effectively address these challenges for the future.

Perhaps the greatest challenge that has, and continues to face foster youth is a general lack of life skills training and independent living preparation. As one of many foster youths that “aged out” of the foster system, I regret never being provided basic preparation in areas crucial to functioning as a productive adult in society. Through my professional experiences, I’ve come to find that this is a common thread among foster youths. There is a general lack of provided education in managing personal finances, self-care/reproductive health, employment preparation, and even basic skills such as cooking and driving a vehicle. This gap in services serve to exacerbate an ever-present list of challenges already faced by this population.

While I have been fortunate in my adult life to have had the tenacity and resourcefulness to assist in my coping skills, quite frankly, I still struggle with the ability to compensate for my lack of basic cooking, budgeting, and common life skills that I did not receive while I was still a part of the foster system. When I reflect on these challenges accompanied by the daily challenges, we all face as adults, the overwhelming realization is that this issue expounds well beyond me.

We place so much faith and funding in our institutions, and expect they serve their clients by helping them stay safe and meet their needs. I think better preparing our foster youth for adulthood by providing them skills and training to safely and effectively manage their everyday lives is how we accomplish this task and eliminate these gaps in services. There needs to be caring adults and former foster youth who are utilized to train others in these areas as a part of a “pay it forward” initiative.

It is vitally important that Ohio provide a statewide, consistent, and evidence-based approach when it comes to independent living preparation. It is unacceptable that the current level of preparation that a young person receives, is dependent upon which county they live in and/or which private agency is entrusted with their care. For our state not to adequately and consistently prepare foster youth, ages 14 and over, with life skills to help them succeed in the future is a violation of Federal Law.

I would like to recommend that the state seek funding and collaboration with agencies to deliver basic life skills to foster youth. I also propose that every foster youth be evaluated with a standardized assessment for deficits in these or other domains of basic life skills so they can appropriately be linked with agencies to fill these gaps. I am convinced there must be a better way to help protect and prepare foster youth for life before they leave the foster System, and I am fully willing to work with representatives of the foster System to help initiate that needed change. I am inspired by the words of human rights lawyer and activist, Megan Davis, who once said, *“It takes a village to raise a child, and I choose to be an actively-participating member of my village.”*