



Good evening. My name is Lisa Dickson, and I am a former foster youth. I serve as co-facilitator of the OHIO Youth Advisory Board and Communications Chair of ACTION Ohio. Our two groups have been working together since 2006 in order to improve foster care outcomes in our state and in our nation.

I wanted to begin by thanking Children Services Transformation Advisory Council for hosting this series of forums. We share your goal to positively transform foster care in the state of Ohio.

I also wanted to offer heartfelt gratitude to Governor Mike DeWine because he is a long-time champion when it comes to improving outcomes for young people in and from foster care. In his former role as Attorney General, he included Ohio foster care youth in each of his eight Child Safety Summits and empowered foster youth as Subject Matter Experts during the Two Days in May Conference in 2012.

Young people enter foster care due to factors outside of our control, such as neglect, abuse or separation from a parent to due to their death, incarceration or substance abuse. As foster care youth, we did not choose the family into which we were born - we can only make our own choices. In the midst of family upheaval, we seek first to survive the moment at hand, and then try to figure out how to build a positive future.

One thing that threatens our immediate survival is when we are entrusted to unsafe living conditions. The OHIO Youth Advisory Board has received concerns from Ohio foster care youth that their basic needs are not being met in certain, specific group homes, foster homes and residential and adoptive placements.

They have reported being placed in unsafe and/or unsanitary conditions, and having difficulties in contacting their caseworker about the situation. They shared their local agency child abuse hotlines often have long wait times, lack of follow-through on reports made directly by youth, and staff answering the phone who are not youth-friendly.

It is for this reason that Ohio foster care youth and alumni have been advocating for years for an independent office that would investigate their concerns – and requesting that it be housed at a separate entity such as the Ohio Attorney General's Office.

It is our understanding that, in recent foster care forums, foster parents have expressed that they want this office to serve them as well. I care about the needs of all, and so I want to make this message very clear: The struggles that foster adoptive, respite and primary families face are important, and we care about and recognize the need for better accountability and communication between foster parents and their agencies. However, this needs to be addressed by a different mechanism, such as a separate office or a statewide grievance procedure.

Because it doesn't make sense for a future Ombudsman's Office to both defend allegations against foster parents and safeguard young people from further abuse. The office can't do both of those things at the same time. Those two tasks will inevitably come into conflict with each other.

To try to combine both needs into one office risks undermining the very purpose that youth asked for an Ombudsman's office in the first place: To protect youth from abuse in whatever placement they have been entrusted by the system; whether it be foster, adoptive, kinship, residential, or whether the system has chosen to reunify them with bio family.

My second request is that Independent Living Departments should be mandated in every county, and that foster parents and caseworkers who serve teens should be mandated to attend specific training on resources to assist in the transition to young adulthood. As foster youth, whether we are adopted, reunified, or whether we age out of foster care, one thing is certain – we will all grow into adults someday.

The better informed our foster parents and caseworkers are about available resources to help us successfully navigate that journey, the better. Therefore, it is perplexing that foster parents and caseworkers who are entrusted with teenagers are not required to take specific training on resources available to support foster youth transitioning into young adulthood.

This important topic is not mandated in any way for foster parents or caseworkers who serve teens. It is only an option on the training calendar, if it is even scheduled in their area. Often the decision about which training courses to attend depends on whether or not the caseworker/foster parent needs training hours.

This leads to inconsistency in practice, and young people not being informed about resources that exist for the very purpose of helping them. This lack of knowledge is literally costing young people in terms of their short- and long-term outcomes, which can often lead to homelessness.