



Ohio Can Do Better to Support Youth Flourishing into Adulthood

On January 6th the Central Ohio Foster Care Forum sponsored by Governor DeWine's Children Services Transformation Advisory Council was hosted at Columbus State Community College. Students of the Scholar Network, a support group that provides wraparound services for foster alum students, alongside youth involved with ACTION Ohio, took advantage of the opportunity to use their voice during this special event on their campus.

One by one, young people with direct experience with the foster care system stepped up to the microphone, cheered on by their support network, and spoke to key decision makers. In the audience were Kimberly Hall, Director of the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services (ODJFS), LeeAnne Cornyn, Director, Governor's Office of Children's Initiatives, Kristi Burre, Director, ODJFS Office of Children Services Transformation, State Senator Hearcel F. Craig, and other county administrators and court officials who are participating in the Council.

Their voices offered a unique perspective amidst a chorus of foster parents and professionals working in the system. The youth talked about what it was like for them and their siblings to have multiple placements, and what it was like for their biological parents to spend years trying to get them back.

"Honestly it breaks my heart to hear the testimony of these foster parents that care so much about the kids in their care, because it wasn't like that for me. I wish I had been placed in a family that cared, but not all placements are like that," said Amadea Jennings, Columbus State and Scholar Network Coordinator.

Several youth advocated for a special ombudsman office within the Attorney General's office to address the complaints of youth in care who are being hurt by the system and have few people willing to listen. The youth described the barriers to having someone within the county system to hear their concerns.

“Most of them are already overworked and our problems are just more work for them, more paperwork, more hassle. They would rather sweep it under the rug. When constantly understaffed, great lengths to avoid burnout and punitive action for ‘forgivable’ offenses are taken— often at the expense of quality care,” said Caidyn Bearfield, Columbus State student and member of the Scholar Network. She described what it felt like to have her concerns dismissed, as well as specific situations that she felt should have been reported and investigated.

Consider the following:

- Over 27,000 youth in Ohio were in foster care in 2018. The rate of youth in foster care is 20.8 per 1,000, according to data provided by Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.
- A national report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation highlights Ohio’s indicators relative to the U.S. Nationally, 76% of foster alum had earned a high school diploma or GED, and 49% were working by age 21.
- In Ohio, only 43% had earned a diploma or GED, and only 36% were working.

As a state, we can do better to serve the needs of these children so they can thrive as adults. The testimonies of several foster parents demonstrated that even when a caring adult is committed to providing for their needs, many barriers prevent children from achieving positive outcomes. A full account of their testimonies will be reflected in the Advisory Council’s final report, which will be released later this year.

I am so proud of these young people for using their voice to affect change and I am eager to read this report as it sheds light on crucial reforms needed. As Ms. Wright Edelman said in her recent Child Watch column, “When we look at our nation and world through our children’s eyes and hearts we are able to see how much urgently needs action...Let us all begin this new decade and this new year determined not to grow weary as we applaud our children and youths who are acting to build the new world they deserve and that we adults have failed to provide them.”

~ Kim Eckhart, KIDS COUNT Project Manager