



Governor Mike DeWine
Riffe Center, 30th Floor
77 South High Street
Columbus OH 43215

April 11, 2020

Dear Governor DeWine,

The *Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board* is a statewide organization of young people (aged 14-24) who have experienced foster care. The OHIO YAB exists to be the knowledgeable statewide voice that influences policies and practices that impact youth who have or will experience out of home care.

Alumni of Care Together Improving Outcomes Now Ohio is dedicated to improving outcomes for current and former foster care youth. ACTION Ohio brings together the voices of youth, alumni and allies to create lasting change and generate hope for current and former foster youth, based on access to resources, ally support and alumni expertise.

We are writing to you on behalf of both of our organizations, because we have long considered you to be a champion regarding the needs of foster care youth. In your prior role as Attorney General, you included the voices of current and former foster youth in each of your Child Safety Summits, empowered us as Subject Matter Experts during a Two Days in May conference, and supported the Ohio Reach initiative to improve post-secondary outcomes for our population.

The international pandemic posed by COVID-19 has created challenges that have never existed before – and we are dedicated to work proactively on our part to help solve them. First and foremost, we would like to begin with gratitude. Thank you for everything that you and Director Amy Acton are doing to keep Ohioans safe. We notice, appreciate, and will always remember your tireless efforts – and so will the nation – at this time.

We would also like to propose, and offer our assistance in implementing; three proactive measures that we believe will vastly improve current and long-term outcomes for young people in and from foster care. Especially now, in the midst of crisis, our state has the opportunity and responsibility to:

- 1.) Expedite the timeline for establishing a statewide Foster Youth Ombudsman's Office.
- 2.) Extend Chafee supports to age 23, as authorized by the federal Family First Act.
- 3.) Suspend emancipation proceedings for all youth facing release from foster care for six months, allow re-entry for foster youth younger than 21, and allow youth who reach the age of 21 in extended foster care (Bridges) to remain in care through October 30, 2020.

We would love to provide details to support each of these three recommendations...

Recommendation #1

Expediting the timeline for establishing a statewide Foster Youth Ombudsman's Office

April is *National Child Abuse Prevention Month*, and we believe this recommendation is vitally important when it comes to safeguarding young people against abuse. Since the stay-at-home order began on March 22nd, Ohio has experienced a 50% drop in child abuse and neglect cases. This doesn't mean that children and teens aren't being abused - rather, it means that mandated reporters are less likely to be able to witness and make a report.

The stay-at-home order was the right call in order to safeguard Ohio citizens from this deadly virus. It's also true that children and teens are at greater risk of abuse, whether it's from their biological families or in an unsafe foster, group home or residential placement, because they are less likely to come into contact with mandated reporters. Now, more than ever, Ohio needs a statewide Foster Youth Ombudsman's Office. This is something that foster care youth and alumni have been asking for repeatedly since January 2019 (and even before then). The delay in making this happen could literally be a matter of life or death.

Recommendation #2

Extend Chafee supports to age 23, as authorized by the federal Family First Act

According to Section 303(a)(2)(C)(ii) of the Family First Prevention Services Act, states are eligible to elect to extend the use of Chafee funding in order to serve former foster youth through the age of 23. While the deadline for decision-making is not until October, several other states have been proactive by moving to extend Chafee to 23 already. Those states include: Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Oregon, Utah, Virginia and West Virginia.

In the midst of this current pandemic, foster care youth and alumni are being disconnected from work, school, and external support systems. They are at risk of losing housing, and even their lives. A strong recommendation that we have shared with the Office of Children's Services Transformation is that: *If there were ever a time to bypass additional meetings and focus groups and expedite the process of extending Chafee to age 23, that time is now.*

Recommendation #3

Please don't "age out" foster youth/young adults during an international pandemic

We respectfully ask that the state of Ohio (a.) suspend emancipation proceedings for all youth facing release from foster care for six months, (b.) allow re-entry for youth younger than 21, and (c.) allow youth who reach the age of 21 in extended foster care to remain in care through October 30, 2020. Ohio could make a huge positive impact on the lives of foster youth by following the example of Illinois, Alaska, Maryland, and Ontario in this manner.

We thank you for your time, and for always being a champion of foster care youth. We believe that these three recommendations have the potential to vastly improve outcomes for our population in the face of this crisis. Please do not hesitate to reach out to us with any questions.

Sincerely,

OHIO YAB (*Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board*)

ACTION Ohio (*Alumni of Care Together Improving Outcomes Now*)

info@fosteractionohio.org