My name is Jasmine Hardy. I am a former foster youth with a history of involvement in the OHIO Youth Advisory Board, the Mahoning County youth advisory board and ACTION Ohio. I have shared my insights on statewide panels, and served as a mentor for young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood. I am delighted to share my story and give you an understanding as to why keeping siblings together is important.

I have five biological siblings. I entered foster care at an early age, with my sister, due to neglect. My other siblings were placed in different foster homes. We were reunified with our biological mother – but removed once again due to abuse and neglect. At that time, the six of us were placed with my biological grandmother.

Shortly after September 11, 2001, we were removed from my grandmother's house for financial reasons and placed into foster homes once again. I remember this because the trauma being experienced by the nation reflected the chaos that was going on in our lives. Out of the six of us, the two boys were placed together, my two younger sisters were placed together, and my older sister and I were placed in a group home. Before we were separated, I gave my younger sisters my favorite teddy bear. I wanted it to be there to comfort them if I couldn't.

Being placed in foster care as a child can feel as if you are being punished. The purpose is to keep children safe – but being removed from your home and separated from your siblings at the same time definitely feels like a punishment. I was able to successfully advocate to be transferred from the group home to my prior foster home, but my older sister wasn't allowed to accompany me. She had to stay at the group home.

When my siblings and I were being abused in our bio home, we were at least able to rely on one another. We had dinner together and played together. We talked about our struggles, cried on each other's shoulders, and helped each other get through the good times and the bad. We were able to be physically present in each other's lives in order to share our love and support.

But when we were removed, we lost our *sibling support system.* We were forced to adjust to a harsh new normal. I was thankful that my former foster mother was willing to take me back, but grieving the loss of all five of my siblings. I could not talk with my siblings at the dinner table about our future. We had lost the ambiance of everyday connection. The background noise of sibling love and support was gone.

It felt like no one recognized the loss we were experiencing due to being separated and disconnected from one another. The hardest part was worrying about my brother. He struggled with seizures due to a car accident. Who would be there to make sure he took his medicine? Who would make sure he didn't hit his head during a seizure?

Prolonged separation has a terrible impact on sibling connections. It robs us of having shared experiences. We started off as a close family, understanding one another. We knew each other so well. Now, after foster care, it feels like we are trying to get to know each other all over again.

To summarize my thoughts:

- Please do everything possible to maintain ***sibling support systems*** for young people in foster care. Please recognize that, prior to foster care, our siblings are often the only support system that we have.

- It is important for siblings to be together because they know how to support each other though hard times. They have a shared history of facing traumatic experiences together, and helping each other survive.

- Sibling connections also help keep the identity of the family together. Which is important, because, just because a child is removed for safety reasons, doesn't mean that child should have to conform to a brand new identity.

- Siblings can encourage one another when others cannot. Not only during but after our time in foster care. We need our sibling support system during the transition into young adulthood.

Please do everything you can to support maintaining sibling connections,

Jasmine Hardy