

Hello, my name is Jeremy Collier. I am a former foster youth out of Clermont County who aged out in 2008 after spending 7 years in care. Using my experiences in care and the stories I have heard from countless other former foster youth, I feel it is my duty to be a voice for the voiceless, and America's forgotten children. Foster Youth.

There is one common theme that has come up consistently during the years that I have spent doing everything I could to raise awareness about foster youth challenges, and the changes that are needed at a systemic level. One thing that many of us lose the long before we enter foster care and find it nearly impossible to feel while in care. And that is trust. Through the many situations that foster youth face, we are always met with caseworkers, and those who work at foster care agencies. And while many of these people care a lot about foster youth, they do not work solely for the child. They are not independent to focus on the needs and concerns specific to the foster youth - and from my own experience, that makes it hard for many foster youths to trust them and openly share the experiences that may be plaguing them in their home.

I have repeatedly heard from foster youth who had severe and scary situations occur to them while in a foster care placement. Many have confided in me about being sexually assaulted by a foster parent or even a foster sibling. When they shared this with a caseworker or a counselor, they were not believed - and thus the sexual assaults continued. You see, their foster parent was known at the school they went to and was "an upstanding citizen, and would never harm a child."

Time after time, I have heard this exact story. My cousin went through this where they were held captive by a neighbor for hours in a basement and subjected to sexual abuse. Even her parents did not believe it, because the neighbor was a "nice guy, and kids just make up stories." Another friend of mine was put into a group home where she was forced to take psychotropic drugs solely for being a foster child without any specific reasoning or diagnosis.

I traveled to Washington D.C. last summer to speak to members of Congress about my experience in foster care and to push for nationwide changes to the system to better support youth in care. While there, I met an amazing young man who happened to be transgender. He shared his experience as a transgender male placed with a family that held strong religious beliefs and opinions in opposition of transgender rights and support. He was ridiculed and verbally attacked on a daily basis, simply for being who he was.

I could name countless other stories just like this where the system has failed foster youth. And many of these stories could either be prevented or at the very least lessened the negative impact the youth if they had someone fighting solely for them within our state. That is why we are in dire need of an Ombudsman office here in Ohio.

We need an office that works solely on behalf of the youth to investigate concerns and to advocate for the much-needed changes to the foster care system. This one office can give foster youth a sliver of trust that they have someone in their corner every single day and that there is someone that they can contact about their situations without fear.

This office can and should work for more than just those in foster care. These stories of abuse and neglect ring out from all types of homes from living with your biological families, kinship care, respite homes, group homes and residential housing.

The office could be housed in the Ohio Attorney General's Office, which already has a Crimes Against Children unit and access to the Bureau of Criminal Investigation. This would ensure that the Foster Youth Ombudsman's Office is able to conduct an independent and thorough investigation into youth concerns.

The voices and involvement of those with lived experience is key to making this office a success. My recommendation for an ombudsman goes beyond just having an independent agency/office doing the necessary investigations and advocating for youth. I believe that having someone working in this office, with the experience of going through foster care, is essential. While anyone can work to understand what it is like to go through the system, there is no better expert than those that have directly experienced it.

In closing, I hope you consider this dire need for an Ombudsman's office here in the state of Ohio. There are many other states that already have offices in place and work in many different ways. It is time for us to take a stand, open our ears and our hearts to these stories, and fight for a better and safer future for these youth. I implore you to take this action sooner rather than later, and to assist me and other foster care advocate in giving a voice to the voiceless children in our society.

Thank You,

Jeremy Collier