

Good morning, my name is Nikki Chinn. I am a former foster youth who aged out Franklin County, Ohio in 2008. I am one of the founding board members of ACTION Ohio, the Youth Constituent Liaison on the board of My Very Own Blanket and a member of the Columbus State Scholar Network. I spend countless hours advocating for youth in care and former foster youth. I also mentor older youth in care.

I want to first thank you for taking the time to hear our testimonies and for being a part of the solution.

The Big Picture:

I am going to be discussing congregate care settings in foster care today. When it comes to foster care, congregate care settings include residential facilities and group homes. These settings are quite restrictive and should only be used if a youth actually needs that level of care.

Unfortunately, we know that this is often not the case, especially with teens in foster care. There is a serious lack of foster homes that will take in teens; what that means is that teens are often placed in group homes and residential facilities, even though this is not the “least restrictive placement.” There have also been cases of teens being placed in juvenile hall when they have not committed any crimes because there are no foster homes that will take them, and the group homes and residential facilities are full.

Teens are also more likely to be placed in residential facilities or group homes for extended periods of time, due to not having an available foster home to step-down to. I know of far too many young people who have spent several years in residential facilities for this reason; some staying there until they “age out” of care. Residential facilities and groups homes are meant to be short-term, which often does not happen.

With the current Pandemic, fewer and fewer foster homes are accepting teens causing more of them to be placed into congregate care facilities. Foster placements are afraid to bring them into their homes due to the possible risk that the young person might be infected with COVID-19. Some of our young people have described this situation as: “feeling like lepers.”

Congregate care facilities rarely provide an atmosphere of “normalcy” for youth. Residents have expressed repeated concerns about being disallowed access to a cell phone – and how this undermines their ability to stay connected with their support system. The “level system” put into place by many of these facilities violates youth’s rights by not allowing them visitations with their siblings or family members until they reach a certain level, and by taking away visitations for a punishment. Visitations are a right and not a privilege.

These facilities do not adequately prepare youth for adulthood. We have also been informed that youth who are in these facilities and test positive for COVID-19 are all being isolated on the same unit, regardless of their reason for being placed there. This means that youth who have been abused are being housed with youth who are quite aggressive. This is not a safe situation for these youth.

Facilities have also been known to use food as a punishment. If a youth gets into trouble, some either withhold food or give the youth a cold sandwich instead of a hot meal like the rest of the youth. Food is a necessity and right, not a privilege. It should never be used as punishment.

These facilities are also notorious for not providing adequate access to the proper healthcare when a youth is sick or injured. An example of this is a residential facility by the name of Pomegranate that has a well-documented history of not getting youth to a doctor when they are injured or sick. Staff members have literally told youth that getting medical care is a privilege. Especially in this pandemic, it is vitally important that youth have access to proper medical treatment.

We have also gotten reports that when a young person is admitted into these facilities, they are handed the Youth Rights Handbook and then asked to sign a paper saying that they received it. Once they sign the paper, the Handbook is promptly taken away from them, and they do not see it again.

Staff at these facilities have testified that they did not receive proper training in how to de-escalate conflict. In some of facilities, staff abuse the youth. Once again, Pomegranate has a documented example of this; a former staff member reported that she was stressed, over-worked, and not properly trained in de-escalation techniques. She reacted by punching a young person multiple times.

Instances such as this, and other abusive behavior – including sexual abuse - are some of the many reasons why youth in these facilities have requested that there be cameras in every room of the facility (other than the bathroom) and that every part of the room be visible on the cameras.

Our Intent:

As a group of advocates, made up of former foster youth and current foster youth, these are the points we want to address:

- We want to prevent congregate care facilities from being a “dumping ground” for teens. As a parent, you would not place your child in group home or residential facility if they did not need to be there. For youth who are in foster care, the state is their parent, and the state needs to do everything they can to ensure that this is not happening.
- We do not want youth to feel confined, voiceless, and unsafe.
- Youth in congregate care facilities need to have normalcy.
- When it comes to unsafe facilities, such as Pomegranate, we have learned from the state that it is incredibly difficult to shut these facilities down. This is very concerning to us. We know that Ohio’s future implementation of the Family First Act will have provisions regarding Qualified Residential Programs. We hope that this will help address this issue. Unfortunately, and especially with the COVID-19 pandemic, this does not seem to be on the radar anytime soon, which continues to put our youth in danger.

Suggested Solutions:

- **State oversight** regarding how congregate care placements are handling:
 - Youth infected with COVID-19
 - Youth with varying needs (*i.e. not rooming a youth who has aggression with one who has been victimized*)
 - Ensure that all youth have access to adequate medical care

- Making sure that all facilities have cameras in every room other than the bathroom (as requested by the youth) and that the entire room is visible on the cameras
- Normalcy practices
- Consistent and proper preparation for adulthood
- Maintaining healthy emotional connections for youth
- **State to issue directives** such as:
 - **Forbidding** congregate care placements to issue punishments that violate youth rights or that create barriers regarding normalcy, preparation for adulthood and access to healthy relationships (*i.e. you are on the wrong level and therefore cannot visit with your sister, or you did something wrong and not allowed to have your home visit*)
 - Disallowing agencies to use withholding of food as punishment
- **Required staff training for all employees** on normalcy, conflict resolution and de-escalation, and trauma-informed care. NO Utilization of restraints.
- **Empowering youth** (especially right now) with more therapy, stress busters and caring connections
- **EVERY youth in congregate care needs and deserves:**
 - To receive and be able to keep the Youth Rights Handbook
 - To receive therapeutic care and access to healthcare
 - To receive consistent and adequate preparation for adulthood
 - To be able to maintain healthy emotional connections, which assist in healing from past trauma (*i.e. let youth keep and use their cell phones during downtime, provide video-call visitations, etc.*)

Thank you once again for your time,

Nikki Chinn