

My name is Cloe Cooper, and I am a former foster youth who aged out of Franklin County Children Services. I serve as a member of ACTION Ohio, a Coordinator and Peer Mentor for the Scholar Network at Columbus State Community College, and Director of Outreach for AgedOutt, all of which are non-profit organizations that advocate for and behalf of former foster youth seeking to prepare emancipated foster youth in Central Ohio with the tools they need to navigate the workforce and higher education.

Thank you for spending time with us today and allowing us to help identify and design solutions to the hurdles faced by former foster youth here in Ohio, especially in the midst of the current international pandemic. When it comes to safety measures in response to COVID-19, our society's shutdown has impacted former foster youth pursuing higher education. This includes myself, and many of my brothers and sisters of the system.

Here at Columbus State Community College, we have an amazing program that offers support to former foster youth called the *Scholar Network*. The foundation of this program is based on developing a sense of community for former foster youth on campus. One of the key components of this program is hosting monthly events during which students with a foster care history gather to share a meal and participate in enrichment activities. Participants receive gift card incentives to help overcome food or transportation insecurities that might otherwise impede their participation.

When COVID-19 hit and our campus shut down, many Scholar Network members became disconnected from the 'chosen family' that we had discovered and created on campus as a result of this program. We experienced challenges in accessing adequate technology and wiFi in order to pursue ongoing connection to our courses. Some students had to drop out of classes entirely, due to being unable to adjust to a remote learning environment.

In addition to challenges faced by former foster youth in adjusting to an online learning environment while pursuing higher education, several of us lost our jobs, are unable to collect unemployment, and fear that being unable to pay rent will result in eviction and utility shut off - and ultimately uproot our goals for earning a degree. Fortunately, both CSCC administrators and Scholar Network program staff have been able to so far to adapt to unexpected changes by facilitating online meeting platforms, stipends by mail, and opportunities for students to access hot spots and chrome books on loan from our institution.

While our community has been quick to jump to action, what this situation truly brings to light is how vulnerable our population was to begin with.

The challenges that our nation faces in the midst of COVID-19 are not new to former foster youth, and it should not take a pandemic to bring to the forefront barriers that we face on a daily basis. I know we can collectively do better. We must be proactive in providing the tools and resources that youth need. It is within our scope of influence to take direct measures to prevent foster alumni from dropping out of school and losing their income, housing, and support systems both during and after this global pandemic.

Proposed Solutions:

- **We ask that the state of Ohio please extend Gov. DeWine's order to prevent youth from aging out of care beyond June 30, 2020.** This need existed before COVID-19 and will remain afterwards. There is no magical number that makes a young adult ready to be living independently, and a vaccine for COVID-19 has not yet been identified.

- **The Family First Prevention Services Act allows states to extend Chafee eligibility to 23. Ohio should adapt this permanently.** Chafee funds are flexible enough to offer support for whatever young people need.
 - o ACTION Ohio knows and cares that Ohio spends its full allocation of Chafee funds every year. Even as we ask for this age extension, we continue to partner with the National Center for Housing & Child Welfare in reaching out repeatedly to federal policy decision-makers, asking them to increase Chafee funds and to lift the 30% cap on Chafee funds allotted to room and board.

 - o Our hope is that this federal advocacy effort will help states like Ohio provide support during the COVID-19 crisis while allowing otherwise allocated Chafee funds to remain in contract.

 - o If federal Chafee funding is increased, Ohio must allocate funds to former foster youth in need of emergency housing, lost wages and equipment to access online learning platforms. Additionally, youth who are displaced from their campuses and dorms may feel severely isolated. Chafee funds must be utilized to make sure that youth have access to programs, professionals and mentors to ensure ongoing social connections.

Sincerely,

Cloe Cooper