

My name is Kyajah Rodriguez, and I am a former foster youth, current college student, participant in Bridges, and member of ACTION Ohio and the OHIO Youth Advisory Board.

When faced with unexpected and uncontrollable tragedy, individuals resort to depending on their safety nets to continue moving forward. When colleges close down, students return to their family homes; when jobs shut down, employees rely on their savings to make ends meet. It is a different story for foster youth. After emancipation, foster youth do not have these support systems to fall back on.

Without these support systems, foster youth take a bigger hit than the rest of the population during a global crisis. This is because former foster youth lack the family support systems that others might take for granted. Something such as a loss of employment for a former foster youth leads to drastic results such as loss of housing and food insecurity. It sparks the beginning of a tragic downward spiral, during which the young person loses all that they've worked so hard to build in their efforts toward self-sufficiency, economic security, and emotional stability.

Lacking that safety net to fall back on makes former foster youth highly vulnerable during times of crisis, such as the current international pandemic. It is all too easy for them to become suddenly unable to meet their financial responsibilities, and to further regress into poverty.

This leads to what is perhaps one of the most important pressing issues facing older foster youth, which is the risk of ending up in unsafe, unhealthy, and sexually exploitative abusive relationships with older people. During times of crisis, some former foster youth become participants of transactional relationships, where they depend on someone to provide them with basic necessities such as shelter, food, and financial support. When that person is emotionally or physically abusive, the youth have no choice but to remain in an environment where they are being consistently re-traumatized. That person can also take advantage of them and leverage their needs in order to force the youth into participating in sexual relationships that they otherwise wouldn't have. In its worse case scenario, this dynamic looks like sex trafficking. The pandemic exacerbates this issue by depleting foster youth's already thin financial resources. It threatens their reproductive health, their wellbeing, and their lives.

Depending on the kindness of strangers to meet their basic needs means that many former foster youth end up couch surfing, which it makes it difficult to social distance, and makes them vulnerable to being exposed to COVID-19. Furthermore, the threat of this virus has led to less people being willing to open their homes as foster parents, host homes, or shelters during a time of crisis. This means that young people who might otherwise be staying on a friend's couch are now homeless. Prior to the pandemic, it was already difficult to place teens. Now there are less people willing to foster all together at this time, creating even more teen homelessness.

When youth are trapped in abusive or unstable settings, there comes an increased risk of them turning to unhealthy and unsafe coping mechanisms. These include self-isolation, drugs and alcohol use, self-harm, and eating disorders.

While enduring these struggles, youth are re-traumatized. They are unable to make ends meet as a young person just entering adulthood without a support system. They have already worked so hard, despite lack of resources, to create some sort of stability for themselves – and suddenly, all that is erased at no fault of their own. This triggers depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, etc. in a time when youth have very limited access to medical care. Worse case scenario, this can lead to increased incidents of suicide or attempts among former foster youth.

Here in Ohio, we are deeply grateful to Governor DeWine for issuing a moratorium for aging youth out of foster care and Bridges during the current international pandemic. This resource is set to expire on June 30, 2020. Since a vaccine for this deadly virus has not yet been found, we ask that this resource be extended until at least December of this year.

Likewise, we ask that Ohio to please move forward to extend Chafee supports to age 23, as authorized by the federal Family First Act. We care and recognize that the federal Chafee funding is long overdue for an increase. Please know that we continue to reach out to federal legislators encouraging them to champion the cause of increasing Chafee funds.

Thank you for taking the time to listen and care about this, and let's keep working together to develop proactive solutions. Doing so will result in improved outcomes for former foster youth throughout the state.

Sincerely,

Kyajah Rodriguez