

Thursday, March 11, 2021  
Ohio Senate  
Government Oversight and Reform Committee  
Testimony on HB 4

Lisa Dickson  
Communications Chair  
ACTION Ohio  
Alumni of Care Together Improving Outcomes Now  
[lisa@fosteractionohio.org](mailto:lisa@fosteractionohio.org)  
(614) 787-5257

My name is Lisa Dickson. I am here on behalf of two organizations. The OHIO Youth Advisory Board represents foster care youth, ages 14 -24. The OHIO YAB exists to be the knowledgeable statewide voice that influences policies and practices that impact youth who have or will experience out of home care. ACTION Ohio is an alumni group of former foster youth who are dedicated to improving outcomes for the next generation. Our two groups have been working together since 2006 to make a difference, side-by-side.

The PCSAO Factbook states that the #1 reason that children and teens enter foster care in the state of Ohio is physical abuse. Now, let's think about the children and teens who aren't being counted or included in that number, because the abuse they are experiencing has fallen through the cracks. How long can they continue to survive?

As a former foster youth myself who experienced physical abuse as a child, for many years without intervention, I strongly support this bill. I, and many of our members, can testify from personal experience that physical abuse comes with a feeling of powerless. It doesn't just make you feel incredibly unsafe – it makes you feel invisible. To experience abuse without intervention from the adults in their lives gives children and teens a scary message about their worth and what to expect from other people.

It is for this reason that members of the OHIO Youth Advisory Board and ACTION Ohio previously helped advocate for Ohio municipal and county police officers to become mandatory reporters of abuse and neglect. Prior to March 19, 2019, Ohio was the only state in the nation that didn't include police officers on its list of mandated reporters. With this in mind, it makes great sense in terms of timing that, three years later, in March of 2021 House Bill 4 is proposing to take the next step forward by requiring cross reporting from public children services and law enforcement in order to prevent child abuse cases from falling through the cracks.

We deeply value Ohio police officers and believe that they are often in unique positions to intervene and assist in the life of a teen or child. For example, if a police officer is called to intervene in a domestic situation, they might see something that leads them to suspect that abuse is taking place. When they report their suspicions to Children's Services, this might ultimately end up saving that child or teen's life. Having an MOU between children services and law enforcement and reviewing it annually will help to further build the relationship between child welfare and peace officers. It will hold child welfare accountable to investigate these concerns as well.

The shared goal must be to address the fact that sadly, throughout the state of Ohio, in every legislative district, there are children and teenagers who - right now at this very moment - are being physically abused. Every child or teen who is being maltreated matters, which is why Ohio foster care youth, alumni and allies also continue to request that Ohio establish a Statewide Foster Youth Ombudsman's Office, so that youth who are experiencing abuse in their biological, foster, adoptive, kinship, respite, residential and group home placements can report their concerns and have them be independently investigated.

I urge you to pass this bill. Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions.

**Contact:**

Lisa Dickson  
ACTION Ohio  
Alumni of Care Together Improving Outcomes Now  
[lisa@fosteractionohio.org](mailto:lisa@fosteractionohio.org)  
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