



Governor Mike DeWine
Riffe Center, 30th Floor
77 South High Street
Columbus OH 43215

June 18, 2021

Dear Governor DeWine,

My name is Jonathan Thomas, and I serve as NW Ohio Youth Ambassador for the Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board, a statewide organization of young people (aged 14-24) who have experienced foster care. 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.

I am humbled, and grateful for the light and attention that you have focused on the needs of young people in and from foster care. Under your leadership, child welfare has continued to evolve, and progress is being made here in Ohio. Much work still needs to be done, and it is vitally important that today's youth be actively and authentically involved in conversations.

We thank you for your recent handwritten note. We care about your busy schedule, but when time permits, we would still like to meet directly with you regarding our proposed design for the Youth Ombudsman Office, and the need for this office to be:

1. Youth specific
2. Able to operate independently of ODJFS
3. Designed with input from current and former foster youth

Our fear is that details can be lost in translation. Even as Ohio foster care youth and alumni were proposing specific LSC language for inclusion in HB 110, meetings were held without our input or involvement regarding drafting a recent amendment to HB 4. This was confusing and troubling to members of the OHIO YAB.

Therefore, I am writing once again to stress the importance of establishing a Youth-Specific Ombudsman Office. I myself have experienced abuse firsthand and have personal experience as to why such an office is needed. My siblings and I made several attempts to run away from our abusers, and to call the police, and each time we were returned home. Rather than being safeguarded, it felt at the time that my siblings and I were viewed like dogs who had gotten off of their leash and needing to be returned to their owner.

This caused us to remain in a very dark situation longer than we need be, and some of us have yet to recuperate from the evil that happened at the hands of our bio home. I therefore am extremely grateful that I was able to be brought into foster care, and for you, Governor DeWine, and your long-term championing for foster youth as victims of crime.

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words, and so I wanted to share some images that capture our vision for the Young Ombudsman Office:



Ohio youth experiencing abuse in biological, foster, adoptive, kinship, respite, residential and group home placements...

We hear you and you matter to us.

We will continue to work to make the establishment of a Youth Ombudsman Office a reality.

#YouthOmbudsOffice



For every young person who has called their local child abuse hotline and not been listened to, or has expressed concerns to others and not been taken seriously...

We will continue to work to make the establishment of a Youth Ombudsman Office a reality.

#YouthOmbudsOffice

Why Should This Office Be Youth Specific?

So that youth are not silenced...
Lessons learned from other states indicate that when an Ombudsman office tries to serve adults and youth, it ends up serving primarily adults.



Why Should This Office Be Youth Specific?

Trying to serve both youth and foster parents creates an *insurmountable conflict of interest* in cases when a child or teen reports being abused by their foster parent.



I am not suggesting that a Youth Ombudsman Office is the magic elixir that cures all child abuse. But what I am hoping to relay is that the lives, hopes, and dreams of young people become subject to those who are over them. Therefore, as adults, and elected officials, it should be our duty to create a place where children and teens can reach out for help when they are being abused, and their voices and concerns are not being listened to by others.

I believe that a Youth Ombudsman Office is key in assisting abused and neglected children and teens whose voices are currently going unheard. I believe that it will save lives. We can only imagine the many things that you are juggling right now, including the state budget and Ohio's recovery from COVID-19. Nevertheless, we feel that the vision of Ohio foster youth for this office will continue to fall on deaf ears if it is not heard directly by you.

It is for this reason that I write with a sense of urgency to repeat our request to meet with you and tell you our concerns directly. It was kind of ODJFS to arrange a recent Roundtable, and we deeply appreciated your participation. However, for our future meeting with you, we would like for the youth to set the agenda themselves. Thank you for recognizing that child protection truly is the North Star.

Jonathan Thomas
OHIO YAB NW Ambassador