

Opinion: Foster children need a voice and to be heard: Dylan McIntosh

Cleveland Plain Dealer, June 13, 2021.



Dylan McIntosh lived in 23 different homes during the course of his time in foster care. That's why he is pushing to create an ombudsman office to be a voice for children in foster care. (Photo Courtesy of Dylan McIntosh)

Guest columnist Dylan McIntosh spent 10 years in foster care. He “aged out” of the system at 18 years old. Back in January 2020, prior to the pandemic, Dylan shared his foster care experience with Gov. Mike DeWine’s Children’s Services Transformation Advisory Council.

Think back to when you were 13 years old. Now, think about a time when someone did you wrong and how you handled it. Did you have a trusted adult’s attention to whom you could bring your problem?

If you did, I bet they were able to listen and help you get through it.

Now, imagine that you didn’t live with your family; that you had to change where you lived, with whom you lived and which school you attended -- often.

Also, take away the trusted adult who could help you solve your problems and process your concerns when something went awry.

That is reality in the life of a child in foster care - ever-changing and inconsistent.

I know that reality all too well. In the course of my time in foster care, I lived in 23 different homes. I’ve been able to see the faults and cracks in the well-intentioned system that is meant to help, but oftentimes is under-resourced and under-staffed.

Unfortunately, due to issues with the child welfare system -- ranging from overwhelmed caseworkers to extended wait times on crisis lines and a lack of funding, -- children in foster care who have serious problems often have nowhere to turn, which can lead to tragic results.

We owe more to the most vulnerable.

There is a powerful solution that could help kids in foster care, if done properly. The solution is a Youth Ombudsman Office, serving youth throughout the entire the state of Ohio. It would be an independent office tasked with listening to the voices of vulnerable children who, through no fault of their own, find themselves often outside of their biological family.

What would a Youth Ombudsman's Office do? It would serve youth experiencing abuse and neglect in a variety of settings (foster care, kinship care, respite care and institutional/residential care).

To avoid a conflict of interest, it should be independent from the Department of Job and Family Services. It needs to be youth-specific and separate from agencies serving adult caregivers. It should also possess meaningful oversight of child welfare agencies, in order to assure that issues are solved, rather than lost in the red tape.

Most importantly, it should be designed by those who have experienced the foster care system and it should be created to be easily accessible. It is incredibly important to give youth in foster care a voice and a space to be heard that is separate from the way that foster parents submit their own concerns.

Advocates for foster youth believe there should be “nothing about us, without us” in the creation of solutions impacting children in care. A Youth Ombudsman Office should be no different.

As someone who did not have the benefit of an advocate when I was bounced around in the foster care system, I implore the General Assembly to pass and Gov. Mike DeWine to sign House Bill 110 to create and fully fund a Youth Ombudsman Office to serve the foster youth in our state so that they may thrive and live better than those who came before them.

It may be too late for those of us who have already aged out of foster care, but it's not too late for those in care now and those who may be in the future.