

Foster Youth Seek Independent Ombuds Program

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Witnesses told a Senate panel Tuesday that they want a proposed foster youth ombuds office to be separate from the Department of Job and Family Services.

Kim Eckhart, with the Children's Defense Fund of Ohio, told the Senate Health Committee that the language in the budget (HB 110) doesn't clarify that it will be independent or that it will particularly serve foster youth. The \$1 million allocated in the spending bill could be used to begin a procurement process, with input from foster youth, to develop an outside ombudsman program.

Deanna Jones, who is a former foster care youth and a caseworker in the foster care system, said an independent youth ombudsman office is needed. "I have heard stories in the community that youth have endured more trauma, more abuse, and more neglect as a result of feeling like they were not heard by their service team or the agency surrounding them," she said.

"Ohio children and teens who are experiencing abuse in biological, kinship, adoptive, foster, congregate care and residential placements deserve to be heard - but continue to report expressing their concerns, and not being listened to."

She pointed to the story of Ma'Khia Bryant, who was killed by a Columbus police officer last month. In that case, there were previously reported issues with her foster placement that were not addressed.

"Prior to her death, Ma'Khia and her sister reported that there were adult children in the foster home that were making them feel unwanted and unsafe," Ms. Jones said. "Lacking the current existence of a Youth Ombudsman Office, who also could they have called when they feel their service team was not able or willing responding to those concerns?"

Nikki Chinn, a former foster youth, said current and former foster youth have advocated in recent years to address problems at residential facilities where abuse was reported, and officials did not at first take concerns seriously.

Having an ombuds office serving youth could have led to complaints being investigated more quickly. "Having a Youth Ombudsman they could have called to investigate the issues and take appropriate action would have prevented these vulnerable young people from having to endure the abuse and trauma so many faced at the facilities," she said.

An office that tries to serve both foster youth and caregivers would have an inherent conflict of interest, she said. "Lessons learned from other states are that when an Ombudsman Office tries to serve both youth and adults, it ends up serving primarily adults."

Juliana Barton, governmental liaison for ACTION Ohio, which represents foster care alumni, described her experience with abuse and said when she entered children services custody, she was asked why she hadn't reached out for help sooner. "An office designed by and serving youth and young adults could have prevented the years of abuse I suffered by providing an alternative mechanism to investigate the complaints against my father after children's services failed to intervene," she said.

The advocates also urged members of the Senate General Government Budget Track Committee to establish the office, stressing the need for the ombudsman to be an independent entity built with the input of former foster youth.

When asked, witnesses acknowledged that they are somewhat late given the looming deadline later this month for amendments to the budget. A version of the amendment is currently being drafted, Ms. Eckhart said, and "we are definitely working as speedily as possible."

Even if that deadline is missed, Sen. Steve Wilson (R-Maineville) and Sen. Bob Hackett (R-London) urged the witnesses to continue their efforts. "Sometimes you don't get things done in time for the budget," Sen. Hackett said. "Don't give up." Sen. Hackett added that although he agrees with the need for independence, "the ombudsman should work extremely closely with (ODJFS)."

Sen. Hearcel Craig (D-Columbus) described his own family's experience adopting youth and navigating the system, telling witnesses: "When we say to you we appreciate you coming down it's not hyperbole." Regarding the office, he asked: "What do you see that framework looking like?"

Ms. Jones said the office should not be "just paperwork" and that the statute should "contain some teeth" so the proposal is not brushed aside as just another recommendation. "I just want to really stress it needs to be independent," she asked. "I cannot stress that enough."

Sen. George Lang (R-West Chester), noting his own experience as a foster child, asked the witnesses what they envision success looking like at the conclusion of the biennium. Ms. Eckhart said the state can look at several other states that have created such offices as a guide. But she acknowledged that the health and wellness of children is difficult to measure. "I would encourage you to spend a little bit more time putting some specificity on that," Sen. Lang replied.