



children's
defense fund
ohio



Ohio's Need for a Youth Ombudsman Office and Proposed Amendment to HB 4

1.) The Problem: Current safeguards are failing Ohio children and youth:

- They have experienced difficulties in contacting their caseworker or GAL, lengthy wait times when reaching out local child abuse crisis lines, and lack of follow through on reports made directly by youth.
- They have witnessed a repeated lack of compliance with the *Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act*, a federal law that requires agencies to provide a counseling session after youth ran away to find out why they went AWOL.
- Ohio youth have been subject to trauma due to being entrusted to unsafe placements and worrying their current situation might lead to loss of life. They have felt alone and powerless, and without a resource to reach out to for help without fear of retaliation.

2.) The Solution: A Youth Ombudsman Office for youth throughout the state to be able to reach out to 24/7 to share concerns related to their safety and well-being.

- **This office must 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. Lessons learned from other states are that when an Ombudsman office attempts to serve adults and youth, it ends up primarily serving adults.
- **This office needs to be able to have independent authority:** For this office to operate effectively, it is vitally important that it have statutory authority, the ability to act independently, and access to internal data collected by state and local child welfare agencies.
- **Current and former foster youth must be involved in the office design:** In a “youth-serving” model, youth are viewed as the passive recipients of programs, services, tools and resources. But a youth-empowering model recognizes that consumers of a service should be involved in its design, delivery and evaluation.

3.) House Bill 4 Proposed Amendment:

1. Two equal roles each appointed by the governor with their own division, staff, and budgets: Children Services Ombudsman and Youth Ombudsman.
 - a. **Role of Youth Ombudsman Office:** To respond to complaints initiated by youth and youth adults.
 - b. **Role of Children Services Ombudsman Office:** To respond to complaints initiated by an adult, such as a resource parent, biological parent, or caseworker.
2. OHIO YAB plays a role in interviewing the Youth Ombudsman position and an ongoing role in evaluating the success of the office.
 - a. **The Youth Ombudsman shall prepare an annual report** that is evaluated by members of the Youth Advisory Board.
 - b. **Their OHIO YAB's evaluation** will be presented to the Youth Ombudsman and Governor within 60 days of the release of the report. The evaluation may include recommendations for changes in operational practices based on youth experience.

4.) Additional Details:

- **An adult making a complaint on behalf of a child** would refer their complaint to the Children Services Ombudsman, unless that child requests to submit their complaint to the Youth Ombudsman.
- **The Youth Ombudsman's annual report shall include**, but not be limited to: 1) number of youth-initiated complaints submitted, investigated, substantiated, and resolved by type, i.e. rights violations, abuse or neglect, or other misadministration of duties; 2) number of outgoing contacts made by county to inform youth of their rights and the role of the office; 3) number of youth referred to services, both for those with and without a formal investigation 4) number of incoming contacts made to the organization by type, i.e. phone, online form, social media, email, voice mail, text, etc. 5) Annual spending report and five-year strategic plan with spending forecast and budget proposal to reach long-term goals.
- **The Youth Ombudsman office shall collaborate** with other ODJFS OFC staff and community organizations to assist youth with accessing services in addition to investigating complaints, including providing verification letters to prove they were in foster care, referrals to resources, and addressing barriers to service access.