



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

July 24, 2020

Dear Governor DeWine,

The *Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board* is 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.

Alumni of Care Together Improving Outcomes Now Ohio is dedicated to improving outcomes for current and former foster care youth. ACTION Ohio brings together the voices of youth, alumni and allies to create lasting change and generate hope for current and former foster youth, based on access to resources, ally support and alumni expertise.

We are writing to you on behalf of both of our organizations, to express our gratitude for your helpful response to our most recent letter.

Thank you so much to you and to the state of Ohio for continuing to cover the costs for foster youth who turned 18 between March 22nd and June 30th, and thank you for extending Bridges funding to support young adults in the Bridges program who turned 21 during that time period as well.

We wanted to circle back and make sure that you had received our collage of thanks, featuring current and former foster youth from all over Ohio.

We also wanted to share with you a letter from one of our members asking you to please consider extending the moratorium on aging out of foster care and Bridges, and exploring how Ohio can extend Chafee services until age 23, since this pandemic is far from over.

Thank you for everything that you do for the state of Ohio, especially during these complicated times,

Sincerely,

OHIO YAB (*Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board*)
ACTION Ohio (*Alumni of Care Together Improving Outcomes Now*)
info@fosteractionohio.org

Letter from a member of the OHIO Youth Advisory Board

Dear Governor Mike DeWine,

My name is Faith Wallace, and I am a 21-year-old foster youth, who entered into the foster care system as a teenager. I was placed in a group home where I faced many challenges and a lack of normalcy, prompting me to finish high school early. I graduated high school at age 16, and then moved to another state to live with my grandparents and begin college. I stayed with them until I turned 18, at which time I returned to Lake County, Ohio where I continued my education at Cleveland State University.

I received excellent support from my county Children Services agency in finding a place to live and a safe car to drive. I then moved to Cleveland where I enrolled in the Bridges program, a brilliant program designed to help foster youth work and save their money while not having to stress about paying all their bills alone at a young age. The average young adult between 18-25 years old still receives financial assistance from their family – but former foster youth lack family support, making Bridges and other state programs essential to the stability of our lives well beyond the age of 21.

As you know, in the state of Ohio, foster youth no longer have access to these programs and resources after we turn 21. Other states been able to take advantage of the federal Family First Act in order to extend Chafee until age 23, but Ohio hasn't yet figured out a way to make that happen. Although the average young adult still receives parental help, we as former foster youth seeking to navigate young adulthood on our own, do not. This is made more complicated by the fact that our country is currently faced with a global pandemic like we've never seen before.

Bridges provided a wonderful bridge to my future, but now that I have lost that bridge, it feels like the foundation for my future is crumbling underneath my feet.

The current pandemic has caused millions of people to go unemployed or working very reduced schedules, many of our foster youth included. This is why we were so deeply grateful when you announced in April that you would not force foster youth to age out of the system in the middle of a global pandemic. You extended these resources to foster youth turning 21 through June 31st. For some of us this was a four-month extension, and for others it was a one-month extension. No matter which, it was extremely appreciated by all of us.

Sadly, June 31st has come and gone, and COVID-19 continues to ravage our state and our nation. Speaking personally, I turned 21 on May 25th, and the extension of foster care supports made it possible for me to remain in foster care for an extra month. The Bridges program made it possible for me to work, pay my bills and put money in savings.

Bridges provided a wonderful bridge to my future, but now that I have lost that bridge, it feels like the foundation for my future is crumbling underneath my feet. I live by myself in downtown Cleveland where I attend Cleveland State University full-time and work part-time. I had expected to be able to maintain life on my own, but due to this pandemic, my hours at work have been greatly reduced. My monthly rent is more than I make in two weeks. The money I had previously saved for my future has been depleted. I am now facing a financial crisis, having no way to pay all of my bills each month during this pandemic.

I currently feel nervous and uncertain about my future, and I know that this anxiety is shared by other former foster youth throughout the state as well. Many of us can no longer afford to work part-time and attend college to obtain an education. This negatively impacts our retention in higher education. Likewise, this pandemic has placed one of the largest financial strains on the American economy we have ever seen, making finding and retaining full-time employment difficult.

I can only imagine how complicated your role is as a statewide leader. As you navigate how to operate Ohio and which steps to take in order to ensure the safety of Ohioans, foster youth are also navigating our next steps to take in life. This includes work, shelter, income, schooling, relocation, financial stability, and so many other essential needs. My biggest fear is that my brothers and sisters of the foster care system will end up homeless. Many have had their work hours reduced, are struggling to pay their bills and lack a savings account. They lack family members to turn to for support.

The two recommendations that I would like to make echo those that were include in the OHIO Youth Advisory Board's first letter.

Recommendation #1

Please don't "age out" foster youth/young adults during an international pandemic

Please extend the deadline in order to allow myself and other foster youth to continue receiving the help and assistance we need to succeed, during this time of a global pandemic

Recommendation #2

Please extend Chafee supports to age 23, as authorized by the federal Family First Act

The Family First Prevention Services Act allows states to extend the use of Chafee funding in order to serve former foster youth through the age of 23.

While the deadline for decision-making is not until October, several other states have been proactive by moving to extend Chafee to 23 already. Those states include: *Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington and West Virginia.*

Governor DeWine, I thank you for all of the amazing things that you have done for Ohio and our foster youth, and I thank you for taking the time to read this. I ask that you please take into consideration everything I have said to help secure the lives of our foster youth.

Sincerely,

Faith Wallace

Thank you, Governor DeWine for caring about foster youth

