

Merri Haren

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To whom it may concern,

My name is Merri Haren and I am a former foster youth.

These days though, I am a local business owner, wife to a talented electrical engineer, mother of two high-achieving school aged children, and resident of Ohio for the past 24 of my 30 years. In the past, I have used my life experiences to effect change in the foster care system at conferences when speaking in front of Ohio legislators. Additionally, I worked alongside my fellow emancipated foster youth on advisory boards across Ohio to assist one another in shaping policy for our brothers and sisters still in the system, as well as having provided mentorship for local foster-parents via support groups and training classes to fulfill their annual certification requirements while providing an important perspective for them when it comes to parenting us foster children.

My six years spent in foster care came at the most pivotal years in my young adult life, and paved the way for what would have been my future failure or success. As an “early-emancipated” foster youth, I was not your typical teenager. Despite six different placements from the age of eleven to seventeen and two full years of formal education missing from my academic history, my senior year, I brought a 2.2 grade point average up to a 3.8 by the time I received my diploma.

I graduated high school at 17 years old, rode the city bus to my (technically illegal) full time job from my apartment that I had (secretly) sub-letted in another town. I was able to purchase my first car in cash, and overcame an avalanche of challenges after that, but there is a reason I am telling you all of this. There is a reason I chose to overcome and I worked as hard as I did. I had mentors, disguised as “Independent Living Workers”.

Had I not had people like Julie Willis and her partner Sarah Goins 13 years ago, I would undoubtedly be a statistic today. Julie (not my overworked caseworker or absent foster parents) took me on numerous college trips, multiple job interviews, furniture shopping for my first apartment after foster care, etc., I had nobody else willing to do these things with me, nobody that cared enough or was paid to invest in me and show me the way out. My independent living worker had one on one meetings with me to go over budgeting, banking, getting a state ID and license and spent a lot of time with me that I am aware pulled away from the other 80+ foster children on their case load.

That's right- back in 2008, with a brand-new independent living program in Stark County, Sarah and Julie had over 80 foster youth that they were charged with transitioning out of the system into stable, contributing and high-functioning young adults prepared to live alone in society after foster care with a limited support system. I once asked Julie why she helped *me* so much, knowing that with so many of us desperately in need like me, it was simply impossible to provide for all of us at that same level.

Her heartbreaking answer? She said they had to help the ones who showed the most initiative, the most promise. That answer has NEVER left me, and has been the one reason that I know this fight will never be over for my brothers and sisters. The independent living program is the *absolutely essential* puzzle piece that fills in the gaps that our foster parents and caseworkers do not have the time, motivation, education or resources to fill in themselves. Foster children need

that service to guide them before they become emancipated and shoved out into society with no preparation for life outside of being wards of the state. Anything else is just a stepping stone back into being a ward of the state again.

We all deserve that chance to become healthy, happy and contributing members of society. We all deserve to have loving mentors like Julie and Sarah who are specialists in a microcosm space in this process. It is essential that they know what resources are available for us, that they advocate for us, act as our big brothers and sisters and protect us as we walk into the unknown; As we transition into the adults I know you would want us to be. Take away that Independent Living department and you will be left asking caseworkers who are already pulled to the point of breaking to take on additional responsibilities in an area that doesn't merely suggest, but demands expertise and specialization.

Can we *really* ask our caseworkers to also learn the ins and outs of the higher education financial aid process, take their case loads on college visits, ask them to sit through bank account openings and take the time to patiently explain the process of signing an apartment lease, getting a drivers permit and navigating complicated bus routes...? The things I have listed here are just a small fraction of what was done for me... can we *really* ask those things of our extremely overworked and underpaid caseworkers? The short answer is, *absolutely not*. Society benefits from a youth that is nurtured, educated and successful. Ignore that, and society as we know it will be left in the incapable hands of our misguided youth someday. There is no more sound investment than the ones we make in our children.

Raven Grice, a fellow member of the Ohio foster care system, has listed specific recommendations in her testimony to the Independent Living system that I believe will provide the structural framework necessary to get this program back up and running with clearly set guidelines and steps. Her suggestions and specific calls to action are backed by the end result of someone who received those services. There is a reason *former* youth are coming together now for the youth that are still in the system- we *know how essential this program is* and we want better for our fellow brothers and sisters aging out of it. Please hear our words and consider the benefit to the economy, but more importantly, society, that this program has on our youth.

Sincerely yours,

Merri Haren