

**Senate Health Committee**

**HB 110 – Interested Party Testimony**

**Tuesday, May 4, 2021**

Good afternoon, Chairman Huffman, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Senate Health Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of provisions for foster youth in House Bill 110. I come to you today fully aware of the need for a Youth Ombudsman. It is my hope that after our testimony we will have clearly demonstrated and communicated the need for this role to each of you.

Specifically, I am asking for provisions to be added to HB 110 that:

1. State clearly the future Youth Ombudsman Office will be dedicated to youth and not combined with an office for caregivers;
2. Establish the office as independent from children's services; and
3. Mandate that this office be designed by current and former foster youth.

I stand here today as the alumni of the foster care system in Ohio. I am also here as a caseworker of the foster care system in Ohio. There are times when seeing the view from both sides of the table is incredibly powerful. It is a perspective that is not easily attained but undeniably valuable when it comes to addressing and identifying the needs of the youth in care.

Unfortunately, I have witnessed, from both sides of the table, the need for a Youth Ombudsman Office. Even as a private citizen I continue to see the need of the ombudsman. 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. 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...

This is where sitting on both sides of the table provides a unique perspective and a pause if you will. As a teenager I have definitely felt unheard, undervalued, even silenced regarding my own situation. The life that I have been given to walk out through roles I did not ask for. I'm the one that will have to walk through it and yet there were many times when I was not heard; however as a caseworker I've seen the other side of that picture. Completely underworked and overpaid there are times as a worker you want to help but it is not within your realm your scope or permission to do so. And those moments what is the teenager to do? Who is the teenager supposed to call? And how can we get someone to listen?

I respectfully submit to you the answer is a Youth Ombudsman Office. This office needs to be absolutely separate from any other office in order to conduct independent investigations of abuse and rights violations. The ability to operate autonomously is essential in order to maintain the integrity of the office. Having this office separate from any mechanism to serve caregivers is vital in order to avoid conflict of interest. I would also submit that this office must be staffed and scored by foster care youth and alumni.

I submit to you that this office could have helped so many before me and sadly so many after me. I think of our sister, young Ma'Khia Bryant, who was tragically lost her life a few short weeks ago. While there are aspects of this that may be debatable, what is not up for debate here is a familiar refrain: The fact is that there were previously reported issues with this foster placement and Ma'Khia and her sister did not have another option to share their concerns with. Imagine how this loss of life might have been avoided if the situation had not escalated, and another foster placement had been found?

When I heard about Ma'Khia's loss of life, at that very moment, I must say that I identified with her. Yes, I identify with her because I am black. Yes, I identify with her because I was in foster care. I also identify with her because I have been that foster child who was being mistreated in a home, and when I reported what was happening, my concerns were downplayed and dismissed. 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. 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?

Here in Ohio, we have the immediate opportunity to provide better safeguards for the future. The future Youth Ombudsman Office will save lives. When you make it possible for a young person who has been experiencing prolonged abuse to finally feel heard, you are reflecting to them that they are worth being safeguarded and protected.

When you rescue a child or teen from an abusive situation, you are not just saving the youth's life, you are saving the contributions that young person will make to their community in the future. You are stopping the cycle of abuse, and saving their children, and their children's children.

It's ironic that, in the middle of a budget cycle, those of us with lived experience in foster care are less worried about getting this office funded than we are with getting it right. The effectiveness of the Youth Ombudsman Office directly depends on its (a.) separation from any mechanism to serve caregivers, (b.) ability to operate independently and autonomously, with provisional authority, (c.) including the voices of those with lived experience in its design and day-to-day operations.

Thank you for caring about this. Thank you for taking the time to listen to us. Thank you so much for having an open mind, and thank you for making a space for us when others have cast us aside. I am happy to answer any questions.

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