

Senate Judiciary Committee
HB 4 – Formerly Oppositional Party Testimony
Tuesday, December 7, 2021

Good afternoon, Chairman Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding House Bill 4.

My name is Lisa Dickson, and I am a representative of the Youth Ombudsman Coalition. Organizational members of this growing coalition include: *ACTION Ohio, Adoption Network Cleveland, Athens CASA/GAL Program, Better Together Toledo, the Children’s Defense Fund, Columbus State Scholar Network, Community of Hope, Disability Rights Ohio, El’lesun, the Fostering Achievement Network, iFoster Inc, the Juvenile Justice Coalition, Junior League of Columbus, the Miresa Arts Foundation, the National Center for Housing & Child Welfare, the Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition, the Ohana Project and Think of Us.*

As a former foster youth who experienced physical abuse as a child, for many years without intervention, I am here to share my journey from being a proponent of this bill, to experiencing deep concerns about draft wording related to a statewide Ombudsman, and how I and others have been won over by the responsiveness of pages 27-28 of Amendment #134-2057-02.

When House Bill 4 was first introduced, I was a strong proponent. At its heart, House Bill 4 is about better communication between law enforcement and public children services to prevent child abuse cases from falling between the cracks.

Prior to March 2019, Ohio was the only state in the nation that didn’t include police officers on its list of mandated reporters. Ohio foster care youth and alumni were deeply concerned about this, and it was our honor to testify in favor of House Bill 137 which amended Ohio Revised Code to make municipal and county police officers mandatory reporters of abuse and neglect.

Likewise, in March 2021, when House Bill 4 proposed requiring cross reporting from public children services and law enforcement to prevent child abuse cases from falling through the cracks, I and others eagerly testified in support.

Experiencing abuse as a child and as a teenager not only makes you immediately unsafe – it makes you feel powerless and invisible. Experiencing abuse without intervention from the adults in their lives sends children and teens a dooming message about their worth and what to expect from other people.

This is why I and fellow members of the Youth Ombudsman Coalition have held firm when it comes to the need for a youth-specific office. We have been insistent that the youth-serving office be separate from an adult-serving one. We have reiterated the need for the youth themselves to have a voice regarding who is entrusted with the role of Youth Ombudsman, and for youth to be able to review annual reports and evaluate this office’s effectiveness.

We did not do this to stall the legislative process, but rather because child safety and protection truly is the North Star. Nothing matters more than that.

It matters that current safeguards are failing Ohio youth when they reach out for help. It matters that child abuse hotlines are not responsive to their needs. It matters that certain crisis shelters have become so full due to the pandemic that youth are being turned away. It matters that youth who run away from abusive placements are often sent right back to them.

Having a youth-specific office matters because children and teens who are experiencing abuse need to be heard. Lessons learned from other states show beyond doubt that Ombudsman offices that try to serve youth and adults at the same time wind up primarily serving adults. Likewise, trying to serve both youth and adults creates an insurmountable conflict of interest in cases when a child or teen reports being abused by their foster parent, adoptive parent or kinship caregiver.

Including the voices of those with lived experience matters. Core principles of child protection include: (a.) the child's survival and development, (b.) the best interests of the child, and (c.) empowering the voice of the young person themselves. Today's youth are more than just passive recipients of programs, services, tools and resources. They can and should be involved in design, delivery and evaluation.

Therefore, we have repeatedly asked for a Youth Ombudsman Office that exists separately from one serving adults, and that current and former foster youth be involved in design and operation.

We thank Representatives Manchester and Plummer for making those changes on pages 27-28 of Amendment #134-2057-02.

And we thank each of you for caring about Ohio youth who have experienced complex trauma due to being entrusted to unsafe placements. Thank you for caring about children and teens who have lost their lives due to lack of protection. Thank you for moving forward to create this resource for youth to reach out to for help without fear of retaliation.

Chairman Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you once again for this opportunity to provide testimony regarding House Bill 4.

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