

The Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio (OHIO) Youth Advisory Board exists to be the knowledgeable statewide voice that influences policies and practices that impact youth who have or will experience out of home care.



February 6, 2022

Good morning,

This message is directed to Governor DeWine and to the leadership team at the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

My name is Kimberly C. Rhyan, and I experienced foster care as a toddler and as a teenager. I left foster care at age 19 and was my own to navigate the world.

I am writing to request that the state of Ohio extend foster care until age 23, as authorized by the federal Family First Act. According to Section 303(a)(2)(C)(ii) of the Family First Prevention Services Act, states are eligible to elect to extend the use of Chafee funding to serve former foster youth through the age of 23. Foster youth need holistic support, educational and career support, mental health opportunities and foster care extended to 23.

At age 19, I wasn't ready for complete independence. I gradually learned to navigate college and the "the real world" on my own. Academically, my first semester of college wasn't the greatest -- I remember two D's and one F -- but my senior year, I finally made the Dean's list.

During college, I didn't have anyone to financially lean on and it was up to me, to figure out everything from school loans to medical needs. I didn't sign up for Medicaid until my sophomore year, when I was experiencing severe chest pains. After going to the doctor, I found out that I had gallstones and needed to have my gallbladder removed.

There wasn't a single adult who explained to me that as a former foster youth, I was eligible for Medicaid. After I completed my surgery, I never utilized my benefits for any other medical services, such as dental or annual check-ups. I was very confused and wished I had more support. During my sophomore year, the same year, I had my gallbladder removed, I isolated myself and was very depressed and was experienced suicidal ideation. I was afraid of stigma and what would happen if I asked for help. I didn't want to be forced to drop out or judged, so I kept my depression to myself.

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I disclose these very personal details of my life between ages 18 and 23, because I was on my own and struggling without a support system that understood my challenges and barriers. Yes, I beat the odds, but the struggle came first, when services, should have launched me to success, I struggled to achieve my goals, time and time again.

Now, I am 44 and thirty years have passed since I first went into foster care. I have spent the past 9 years dedicated to advocating for foster youth. I have served with Ohio Reach, and national organizations that support foster youth to achieve their educational goals. I have also worked at Columbus State Community College, the University of Cincinnati, and UC Clermont.

I have worked for years to help youth from foster care complete high school, trade schools, and/or college. I have learned first-hand, through the voices of the students I have supported, that they need foster care extended to age 23. I have seen the struggles and hurdles firsthand, and I know we can do more to make a real difference.

I recently lost one of my mentees; a former foster youth who was only 21 years old. She had been emancipated just prior to 21 - and I cannot help but wonder, if she would still be here, if she had been offered extended services. She needed wrap around support and more time to grow and thrive with tools to succeed. I am writing my letter with the hope that you will be able to see, through my story and hers, that we can do better.

The state of Ohio must extend.....
...*A holistic support system to 23*
...*Educational and career support to 23*
...*Mental health opportunities to 23*
...*Foster care to 23*

Please hear my plea; 1,000 foster youth emancipate every year in Ohio. You have the power and authority to change so many lives. Foster youth don't have to jump so many hurdles if you elect to remove them.

Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony and for recognizing the urgency of Ohio making this change as soon as possible. The lives and futures of Ohio young people are literally at stake.

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