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Good afternoon Honorable Members,

My name is Ov'Var'Shia Gray-Woods. I am the President of Park West Foundation supported youth group, - Empowering Foster Youth Through Technology better known as EFyTECH.

It's been empowering and healing to use my lived expertise of foster care to advocate for reform and the wellbeing of youth in the foster care system. Our team has worked hard throughout the pandemic and beyond, to connect foster youth to resources and opportunities to succeed in life and to ensure their voices are heard.

I would like to briefly highlight my experience in foster care and elaborate on the importance of the amendment of section 8b (MCL 722.958b) under the "Foster care and adoption services act" and why I support the passage of House Bill 4676.

During my freshman year in high school while in foster care, I experienced a lot of hardship. Prior to my foster care case closing at 14, **NO ONE** informed me of Chafee/Youth In Transition (YIT) funds and closed case services in order to help me manage life, when I transitioned out of care. **All I knew for sure was once my case was over, that would be it.**

At the time, I advocated for myself and stated that I did not want my case to close because I knew that there were outstanding issues at home, that my mother and father could not resolve. Unfortunately, Despite my wishes, my case was closed and I was reunited with my family. As time progressed, my high school senior year was starting with extreme hardship as a new teen parent with limited resources. In spite of the challenges I faced at the time, I went out into the community to search for resources, I maintained an above 3.0 grade point average and was enrolled in the Park West Foundation's "College Prep" program class of 2016.

That was until a CPS intervention that gave myself, my child and 5 of my siblings 15 minutes to decide where we were going. We were taken away from our mother without preparation. A former foster parent of my younger brother opened up her home to us at that time. There were no arrangements or communication from CPS OR DHHS to help us with school, transportation to school, assistance with food and all the other logistics that were needed to be okay. I was moved over an hour away from East Detroit to 275 And 6 Mile Area.

All of our calls and questions to that CPS worker went unanswered. EVERYONE including the foster parent was confused on what was happening. We had NO PAPERWORK showing what happened to us. Everyone was afraid to make a mistake so everybody kept calling the CPS worker on what to do next with no answer. My brother's foster parent struggled with food security having seven children in the home with no resources, finances and even had her

electricity shut off due to not being able to afford the dramatic increase bill due the negligence of DHHS.

All of us were missing school and all our grades were failing. My child's father used this CPS case as a reason, to file for sole custody of our child of which he was awarded temporarily, in spite of his complete absenteeism in our child's life before this moment. An attendance officer from my brother's school was about to arrest my mother for my brother's absenteeism, when my mother just decided to bring all of us back home to the very same condition that we left the house. The worker never offered my mother any help or resources to resolve the problems that made our home unsuitable to live in , nor did anyone from my school district check on my wellbeing . NOTHING changed.

We found out later due to the Park West Foundation, my parents were my education rights holder the entire time and what the worker did was considered a “safety” plan/removal. This quote on quote “safety plan” actually created a lot of UNSAFE and UNCERTAIN conditions that were costly to all of us.

I had to work VERY HARD to bring my grades back up and even had to enroll in credit recovery on top of my regular course load while being a full time single parent. IF my voice mattered when I explained that I did NOT want to go back home and that I wanted to stay in foster care. If resources were put in place to prevent all of these issues , prior to my senior year of high school? I would NOT have endured the amount of trauma and stress I had that year.

BASED on how the system treated my mother, I understood it was up to me– to help myself and my child. I could not afford to lose my child for what my parents OR community could not do for our security and wellbeing. With the help of the Park West Foundation, I made a quick decision to move out on my own, to create stability and a better environment for my child at the age of 16. I was FORCED to be self-sufficient at the age of 16 with a child, when support should have been in place for me according to the LAW.

AND THIS is the everyday reality on the ground for many youth in care. The amount of disruptions I had in my personal life as it relates to transportation, housing, education, resource education in the system- created insecurities and instability in my personal life. I am so thankful to be a part of the VOICES that it is taking to make sure that the thousands of youth that are in care in the State of Michigan DO not experience what I had to — in order to get to this point. Prior to all of my amazing community service, graduations and positive life changes , I went through a lot of stress, anxiety and depression due to the system being broken. I had the willpower to change my life but MOST YOUTH become discouraged and quit .. DUE TO THE SYSTEM. I now stand here , proud today, being in the room with a REPRESENTATIVE that took my experience and the experiences of other youth in care seriously .. my concerns seriously .. my life seriously while creating House Bill 4676. This bill prioritizes empowering youth in the foster care system by encouraging the community to do the same. Each section of this bill states that “WE MUST”. We “MUST” prioritize youth in care, the future depends on US NOW. This bill highlights the most fundamental issues that youth struggle with receiving while in

care. I support House Bill 4676 because it makes me feel SEEN, heard and valued !. I would like to thank Representative Stephanie Young personally for making this happen - FOR US. **There should be nothing about us, without us and without her including us in every decision , listening to our experiences and empathizing with us on a deeper level - we wouldn't be here today.** I encourage **EVERYONE** in the room to be as actively involved with youth in care , as Representative Young has done with us. Using her power and influence , we were able to use inter-professional collaboration and GET THINGS DONE. Thank you also to all Representatives who have co-sponsored and supported this effort that says loud and clear, that foster youth deserve the same educational opportunities as everyone else. I along with our team at Oark West Foundation EFyTECH look forward to working alongside all of you to support the passage of these proposed bills in the future.