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Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee,
Subcommittee on Work & Welfare
Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care
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Good afternoon, Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Work & Welfare.

Thank you for inviting me to be here today to give my testimony. I am here today to help you understand how family connections, financial resources and peer support programs have helped me navigate the world in and beyond foster care.

My name is Jordan Otero, I am 24 years old. I graduated from Ball State University with my Bachelors Degree in general studies with a concentration in social work. I am now a case manager at George Junior Republic - an agency in Indiana - where I support children and youth who are experiencing foster care.

My seven siblings and I were born in Gary IN, but our journeys since that time have varied. I was removed from my mother's care at the age of 2 and lived with my Grandmother until I was 15 yrs old when she developed Alzheimer's. After that, I moved around between my friend's houses and I was even homeless at one point. I then entered the foster care system when I was 17. I was immediately placed in an emergency shelter where I stayed for a month until my youngest brother's foster parents asked if I could come live with them.

I would like to highlight some of my family history and my experience with having 4 older siblings who all entered the system the day I was removed from my mother's care. I was a young child and only 1 of my younger siblings was born at the time. We were all removed from my mother's care when she and my father were arrested on six counts of neglect of a dependent and my father also had one count of battery.

My older four siblings entered the foster care system and my younger sibling and I went to stay with my grandma and that was how we grew up all of my life - separated from each other. I would see them only a few times a year at visits due to them being in residential facilities or constantly moving foster homes. Three of my four older siblings ran away from foster homes or residential and waited until they turned 18 to ditch the system. Only 1 of 4 older siblings aged out and they immediately exited care and moved away.

My parents would end up having two more children later on who would also live with my grandmother. After my grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimers and went into a nursing home, my younger siblings and I were separated, either living with other relatives or staying at our friends' homes. Shortly after that, the Department of Child Services asked my mother to bring us all into the DCS office and they removed us from her and placed us into foster care. Little did they know that we had fallen through the cracks for years and were removed from her

long before they took us into foster care. I was 17 at this time when we entered foster care. They quickly found a placement for my youngest sibling who was only 9 years old at the time, but they had to place my other two younger siblings and myself into an emergency shelter which was a residential facility because they could not find placement for three teenage boys. I was there for a month before I would eventually go to my foster parents home where my youngest sibling was already placed.

I know often times it is the sad stories that are told when we talk about the foster care system but today I would like to highlight the positive impact of the relationships I have built, the financial support I have received and the programs I have been a part of that all helped me succeed in my early adulthood.

My foster parents are some of the greatest foster parents ever. They have been very supportive in my life after foster care. To this day I have maintained a great relationship with them and my foster dad and I talk on the phone every Friday. My foster parents are people I can lean on for advice and support when I need it.

I stayed with my foster parents until I started college at Ball State University. I relied on their support and a program called Summer Bridge to prepare for my freshman year. Summer Bridge provided me the opportunity to stay on campus of a college in Indiana and earn college credits the summer before my freshman year of college. This allowed for me to get adjusted to the college lifestyle and have a head start in my education.

During this time, I turned 18 and decided to enter the collaborative care program in Indiana which is Indiana's extended foster care system.

While living with my foster parents, I joined the Indiana Youth Advisory Board. I found out about this meeting from my family case manager who said "it's a free 40 dollars, go!". Little did I know that this youth board would be the start of my advocacy journey. The Indiana Youth Advisory Board allows a space for teens and young adults with lived experience in foster care to connect, share, and grow with each other. It also empowers foster youth to advocate for themselves and communicate their needs and concerns effectively. I am still involved with Foster Success who runs the Indiana Youth Advisory Board, and I now serve as a LEAD ambassador, where I help younger youth prepare to engage in the board and advocacy.

One thing I would like to highlight is that my foster parents helped me in getting my drivers license and covered my insurance while I was living with them. Once I went to college, however, I couldn't stay on their insurance, and I wasn't sure how to get my own. I was embarrassed to ask, and drove without insurance. I lost my license for two years for two counts of not having insurance and during one of those times I was involved in an accident. I was then faced with the same reality that my fellow peers in the foster care system had. Forced to rely on public transportation(if there is any), asking people for rides and owing them favors, the feelings of being a burden to others, the feeling of being inferior because I couldn't do what most normal college kids could, or the worst is that some of my peers decide to drive without a license and

dig a further whole that they can't get out of. I was blessed with the fact that I knew I could get my license back and that I just had to pay my insurance. I knew it would end but the sad reality is that some of my peers to this day can't get their license. Now in Indiana that has thankfully changed.

This past year in Indiana, I advocated for the development of the recently implemented Insuring Foster Youth Trust Fund and a \$2M state appropriation to support behind the wheel driving hours and offset auto insurance costs for older foster youth to allow them to more easily get to school and work. I believe that all states could benefit from this model that Indiana has and that every older foster youth would benefit from something like this.

I started by sharing that there are three things which contributed to my successful transition to adulthood:

- Relationships
- Financial resources
- Programs that engage lived experience

I believe all foster youth need these three things in order to be successful and there are three primary ways to accomplish this:

- Prioritize relationships and family placement for transition age youth in foster care. We need relationships and supportive adults who will last far beyond our time in foster care.
- Invest in financial resources that meet the various needs of young people while we pursue higher education, the workforce and find our footing as young adults.
- Ensure all young people in foster care have access to a network of peers and supportive adults. This can be through a youth advisory board, peer navigation positions who can help us find the right resources, or campus support programs. This is critical to reduce the isolation of being in foster care, and empowering us to improve the foster care system for those who are still experiencing it.

Thank you for having me today. It is truly an honor and a blessing to be here. Five minutes is not enough time to give you the full scope of the foster care system and what children and youth experience, so I urge you to meet with lived experience youth in your home state and hear their stories and see who they are.

I want you to have the understanding that our stories are more than just testimonies and sad news articles you see, but that we are people with dreams and ambitions. We are people who break the cycles of poverty and dysfunction. We are people that have achieved many successes and received accolades; with the barriers we faced, it doesn't always make sense for us to be here. Yet, I sit here today to say that we are people who will make success the expectation and not the anomaly. Thank you again.