

Testimony of Weston Charles-Gallo of Liberty, MO
Ways and Means Committee
Worker and Family Support Subcommittee
Hearing on “Making a Difference for Families and Foster Youth”
May 12, 2021

Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify. My name is Weston Charles-Gallo and I am from Liberty, Missouri and I am 21 years old. This is my foster care story, and my recommendations to improve foster care for young people like me.

Before I met my two dads, I lived the life of a chameleon, masking who I am, and trying to fit in where I never belonged. I came from a biological family that was broken from the start. My father was an alcoholic and a drug addict. When he was home, most of the time he was abusive. My mother was a victim of domestic violence and was scared to ever speak her mind.

My father was the deacon of the church and my mom was a member of the choir. I was taught that being gay doesn't fit with worshipping God. I knew that I was gay at a really young age but because my family deemed it an abomination, I couldn't live as my authentic self. I will never be able to forget my father's words, loudly spoken:," If my son turns out to be gay, I will not only beat the gay out of him but throw him out of my house." Those words will haunt me for a lifetime.

At age 14, I was told I was put in foster care because of my parents' inability to accept and support my sexual orientation, because of parental neglect, and an overall hostile home environment. It really made me feel like I wasn't enough, as if the dark thoughts in my head were true. I felt unloved and that all became reality.

When I entered foster care, I was open about my sexuality; that later became a concern in finding a placement. Placements in my rural community that were open and affirming to a gay, bi-racial teenager were almost non-existent. I was told by my social

worker that different potential placements fell through because I might “turn the other children gay” or be a predator. No child should ever hear those words.

This just broke my heart because all I wanted was a family that loved me for me. So, while sitting in a residential facility under an emergency shelter status, I was on the cusp of ending my life all together. Through many hospital visits because of my suicide attempts, bouncing from foster home to foster home, stays in residential care, and even living in an emergency shelter, I gave up my childhood to learn how to be an adult at the age of 14.

Even as I felt that nothing could go right, when I was 15, I received the amazing news that my impermanence in foster care was a thing in the past. I was going to be adopted. I have since learned, unfortunately, that many, many LGBTQ+ foster youth never get that news.

I wish my happy ending was more common for LGBTQ+ foster youth, but unfortunately, many studies show that it is not. An estimated 1 in 3 foster youth identify as LGBTQ+, over two times our representation in the general population. We have significantly worse experiences and outcomes than our non-LGBTQ+ counterparts. According to an HHS-funded study, we experience twice the rate of poor treatment while in care. My experience before I found my dads is typical for LGBTQ+ youth. We experience higher rates of multiple placements, placement in residential care rather than with families, hospitalization for emotional reasons, homelessness, being trafficked, criminal justice involvement and, likely, aging out of care without a family. Because of the system’s failings, the primary pathway to LGBTQ+ youth homelessness is through foster care. It’s important to note that each of these poor experiences and outcomes are worse for LGBTQ+ youth of color like me than for our white LGBTQ+ counterparts.

It is hard to know exactly how many LGBTQ+ youth age out of the system without a family because there is no data collection on outcomes for LGBTQ+ foster youth. I believe that improving the lives of LGBTQ+ foster youth will require recognizing our existence and measuring our outcomes. States, tribes and agencies need data to measure how successful they are in serving LGBTQ+ foster youth in their care. If we collect data, states with better outcomes can share best practices with other states that are not as successful. The John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act adds sexual

orientation and gender identity data collection for LGBTQ+ youth to HHS' Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).

Returning to my own story, I was placed with my two dads and 6 siblings. My dads showed me what it was like to witness a true marriage and live a normal life, expressing the meaning of family. Before I lived with them, I never pictured myself marrying someone or even having a family but they proved to me that anything is possible and without them in my life constantly supporting and encouraging me, I do not know where I would be or even if I would be alive today. I finally found a home where I can live my authentic self.

In the conversation about same-sex couples fostering and adopting, the mission to give children in need safety, stability and love is often absent. I urge committee members to focus on that mission, not on the personal beliefs of adults. If it wasn't for my dads taking a chance on me and helping me embrace my sexual orientation, the color of my skin and who Weston is, I wouldn't be here to share my story. When a child enters the foster care system they just want to find a family that loves them unconditionally and supports them continuously.

Why keep qualified parents from giving children the lives they deserve but never imagined? Because that is exactly what my fathers did for me. We should find more loving families like my dads that can be affirming of all kids in care.

Turning away same-sex couples from fostering and adopting harms all children in the child welfare system. With same-sex couples seven times more likely to foster and adopt than opposite-sex couples, turning away my dads and other couples like them will mean there are fewer families available to foster and adopt. Same-sex couples are also more likely to foster and adopt older kids like me, large sibling groups, and children with disabilities.

Turning away same-sex couples results in fewer affirming homes for kids like me who are LGBTQ+. Please remember that foster children do not get to choose which agency serves them. ALL agencies must affirm LGBTQ+ youth, and discriminating against LGBTQ+ adults undermines that. It sends an awful message to the LGBTQ+ children in their care, that we are not good enough to be parents, and that we cannot look forward to forming loving families of our own. Studies have shown that many LGBTQ+ youth

choose homelessness over foster care because they do not feel affirmed by the agencies serving them. LGBTQ+ homeless youth are twice as likely to die than the broader youth homeless population. So this is a matter of life or death. I urge you to consider that our lives, futures and outcomes are more important than the personal beliefs of adults. We're not asking anyone to change their beliefs. We are just asking to be affirmed and loved for who we are.

I truly believe that faith-based agencies can live their faith and also provide equal treatment to LGBTQ+ families, foster parents, and children. Many agencies have made this journey. Bethany Christian Services, the largest evangelical Christian child welfare organization in the U.S., which operates with 1,500 employees in thirty-two states, just changed their policies this year to allow same-sex couples to foster and adopt in all of their branches. When they made the change, they said, "We will now offer services with the love and compassion of Jesus to the many types of families who exist in our world today. We're taking an 'all hands on deck' approach where all are welcome." Why can't all agencies do this? I think non-discrimination is the foundation for LGBTQ+ kids. I think non-discrimination saves lives.

I also believe that more comprehensive training about sexual orientation and gender identity would have improved my experience in the system. This training should be provided to all adults working with foster care youth, whether they are foster parents, volunteers, case workers, judges or attorneys. As I mentioned earlier, when I entered foster care, I was open about my sexuality; that later became a concern in finding an affirming placement. Had my foster parents been trained on sexual orientation and gender identity, they would have had a better understanding of who I am and I wouldn't have been turned away from homes based on harmful and untrue stigmas surrounding gay people. This training would expand the number of affirming homes that are critical for improving outcomes for LGBTQ+ foster care youth.

The John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act requires training for all adults in the child welfare system. It requires what is already required for youth served by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act - that all adults be trained to respect the social identities of the children they are serving, including our religion, race, and sexual orientation. It bars conversion therapy for LGBTQ+ foster youth. It creates a resource center at HHS for safety, well-being, and permanency for LGBTQ+ foster youth that can carry out research, training, and help agencies do better for kids like me. It gives me hope that other children won't face what I did when I was in foster care.

I want to ask all policymakers, foster care parents and social workers to take the time to put yourself in our shoes and think about what you wanted as a child. LGBTQ+ youth aren't going anywhere. We're here and we're asking to be heard and loved for who we are.

I urge the Committee to support the bipartisan John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act. This Act will end discrimination in the child welfare system and provide affirming services to every LGBTQ+ child in care. All foster youth should have affirming families.

Thank you.