Good afternoon, Chairman Krug and members of the committee. My name is Libby Foster and I am a manager in Family Case Management at Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to testify today in support of AB 239 which relates to providing an income tax credit for former foster youth and youth with prior disability status. I want to thank the bill’s authors Representative Todd Novak and Senator Luther Olsen for sponsoring this legislation.

Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin (Children’s) serves children and families in every county across the state. We have inpatient hospitals in Milwaukee and the Fox Valley. We care for every part of a child’s health, from critical care at one of our hospitals, to routine checkups in our primary care clinics. Children’s also provides specialty care, urgent care, emergency care, dental care, school health nurses, foster care and adoption services, family resource centers, child health advocacy, health education, child welfare services, family preservation and support, mental health services, pediatric medical research and the statewide poison hotline.

Children’s is the largest not-for-profit, community-based agency serving children and families in the state, providing community services to more than 15,000 children and families annually. In partnership with the Division of Milwaukee Child Protective Services, Children’s is responsible for the recruitment, licensing and support of foster and adoptive parents. We also match and place children with foster and adoptive parents. The majority of children and youth have some degree of physical, behavioral and emotional needs stemming from the trauma they have experienced in their lives.

While Children’s is dedicated to finding families for all of the children we serve, there are teens in Milwaukee who reach age 18 without the supportive environment that all young people require to become healthy, safe and successful adults. We know that teens who exit foster care from care without a connection to a family or other supportive adult are more likely to become homeless, require public assistance or become incarcerated. For those youth who experience a redetermination in their disability status upon reaching age 18, they are often left without the necessary connections and ability to cope with their life circumstances.

The federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) helps low to moderate income level families, however it is unavailable to young adults under age 25 unless they are parenting. Many young people receive support from their parents, but former foster care youth lack this invaluable resource. AB 239 would help provide a level of economic stability for those youth in order to help them obtain and maintain a safe, stable housing environment and assist them with participating in secondary education or entering the workforce. While the proposed income tax credit would greatly impact the lives of former foster care youth, the overall cost of implementation would be small, due to the small, but often overlooked and forgotten former foster care youth.
Earlier this week I checked in with a young person who aged out of foster care. I first met Kelly almost five years ago and like most teenagers she was just trying to figure out who she really was and what she wanted to do. But Kelly’s story is different than most 16 year olds that you may know because she was in foster care and at the time in her 9th foster home in 8 years with no permanency resource. She was preparing to age out of the system. I got to know Kelly pretty well and three years ago around this time Kelly was turning 18 and preparing to go off to college- a scary endeavor for many youth, but even scarier for kids like Kelly who have never left the city limits and have no home to go back to. The night before she went off to college instead of being with family and friends, she was with me at Target picking up the last of the necessities like a shower caddy and late night snacks.

I am happy to share that today against the odds, Kelly works two part-time jobs, has her own apartment and most amazingly is on track to complete her undergraduate degree in 4 years. Kelly is exactly who would benefit from the Earned Income Tax Credit. She could utilize the credit to pay tuition or living expenses. It would ease her anxiety about how she will be financially stable so that she can make it to graduation. The Earned Income Tax Credit will make it possible for Kelly to earn the education she needs to obtain employment, so that she becomes a positive contributor to our society. Kelly has a dream of buying a home, so she can reunite with her little brother. The Earned Income Tax Credit will help Kelly realize that dream.

Chairman Krug and committee members, I thank you again for the opportunity to testify in support of AB 239. I am happy to answer any questions now. If you have any questions, comments or concerns after the hearing, please feel free to contact me via email at libby.foster@cssw.org or via phone at 414-453-1400.