



Michigan kids tell stories of neglect, abuse in foster care system

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Some ran from Child Protective Services workers because being put into "the system" was a scarier notion than abuse and hunger.

Some have never had a Christmas or birthday celebration.

They all just want to know someone cares.

Children and young adults from the Michigan foster care system took turns for more than two hours Friday morning sharing their stories, concerns, hopes and dreams with more than 50 policy makers from across the state in hopes of improving the system.

The discussion, called KidSpeak, was part of a four-day camp that started Wednesday and ended Saturday at Michigan State University designed to encourage foster care youth to finish high school and attend college. The camp is a partnership between the MSU School of Social Work, MSU College of Law and the nonprofit youth-advocacy group Michigan's Children.

Many of the youth shared stories of abuse and neglect. They asked policy makers to consider ways to make the foster care system a safer process that sets them up for success.

"This was my opportunity to get outspoken," said Orlando Mitchell, a 20-year-old who spent years in the Michigan foster care system.

Jack Kresnak, president and CEO of Michigan's Children, said KidSpeak was an effort to make sure foster kids do not become forgotten children.

Once they age out of the foster system, which can happen between ages 17 and 20, many of the children are essentially forced to become independent without a family there for help and guidance.

"With foster kids, the state has a special obligation to them because the state has removed them from the care of their parents, and it's by no fault of the children," Kresnak said.

"It's unfortunate that there are not special accommodations made at many universities for these kids - they need a specific amount of support because they don't have families to fall back on," he said.

Money can help ease the transition to college, Kresnak said, but the main thing many youth from foster care need is support and staff services.

For policy makers listening to the young speakers, the resilience in their voices was clear.

"You can hear it in these stories. They get it. High school isn't the end of the pathway to success - it's a critical benchmark, but it's not the end.

"They see college as the way that they get to make their lives better," said Leisa Gallagher, Department of Education Dropout Challenge coordinator and director of the dropout prevention initiative called Reaching and Teaching Struggling Learners.

Angelique Day, camp coordinator, said she hopes the discussion will spark opportunities to improve the lives of foster kids.

"The kids who are living it can probably give us the best idea for how we can make it better for them," Day said.

What foster care youth need, in their own words, is support to transition into the life of a successful, independent adult.

"Teach us how to handle things and how to better ourselves and to get out into the world and communicate with people," Mitchell said.

"Help us to become more responsible when certain things come about and help us with the main work of independence."

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