



Critical Issues in Foster Care: Connecting the Voices of Youth With Real Policy Change

Michigan's Children has been creating opportunities for young people to share their stories, concerns and suggestions directly with policymakers since 1996. Many of these conversations have included the voices of young people currently or formerly served by the state's foster care system. Listening to what courageous young people have shared with us over the years can help policymakers identify where current policy isn't working well, and champion better policy decisions that impact the well-being of the 13,500 children under the state's care.

With child abuse and neglect continuing to rise; recent movement to end Michigan's settlement agreement, which forced some needed changes in the system, and an intention from the Governor's office to combine the Departments of Human Services and Community Health; there has never been a more critical time to pay close attention to the situation of youth in foster care.

Young people talk about their lack of stability – in their homes, in their schools and with the agency staff assigned to help them navigate their world. While the number of placements experienced by youth in foster care has declined over the last couple of years, there remain limited options, particularly in some areas of the state. More can be done to reduce long-term institutional and congregate placement of older youth by placing them in smaller group home environments or with permanent foster and adoptive families. Not surprisingly, a stable home makes a difference in success at school and work. Students who move around a lot are more at-risk of falling behind at school and have difficulty accumulating enough credits to graduate from high school, contributing significantly to the disproportionately high drop-out rate among kids in the foster care system.

Related Policy Recommendations:

1. Redouble efforts to increase the stability of placements for older youth in foster care.
2. Mandate data sharing agreements between human services and education agencies to ensure that systems know when they are serving youth in foster care and that these youth are receiving all of the services available to support them.
3. Provide additional resources to schools to recognize added challenges experienced by students in foster care who are over-aged and under credited.

Young people talk about the lack of support and resources they have available as they move into adulthood.

Each year, about 800 Michigan youth in the foster care system turn 18, and have to make a decision about keeping ties to that system to retain benefits until they are 21, or "aging out." Many of the young adults have no permanent ties to family, more often than not they haven't successfully completed high school yet, and they have varying levels of support. Michigan has taken advantage of federal funding available to support young people to continue in the foster care system until they reach age 21. This is a voluntary program that requires an opt in, with the onus on the young person to remain in the system, rather than putting the onus on the state to make sure that the young person has what they need to leave the system. Because many youth in foster care lived through a great deal of trauma and disarray while in the system, they don't "choose" to remain in foster care beyond age 18 and may not realize or recognize the benefits that remaining in the system could provide.

Related Policy Recommendations:

1. Require documented stability before removing young people from the foster care rolls, including stable housing and employment or education paths.
2. Provide legal assistance to young people formerly in the foster care system until they reach age 25. This mandate for assistance currently ends when young people leave foster care, despite the continued need for legal help.

Young people want more and consistent opportunities to be involved in their own life planning. Current policy does direct that young people are to be involved in permanency planning conversations, and in some circumstances are asked to identify supportive adults of their choosing to also participate in that planning. However, young people continue to report that they are not consistently involved and many state that they have not been asked to identify others who could be involved. Regardless of the cause of this disconnect many young people are not feeling inadequately represented.

Related Policy Recommendations:

1. Include stronger language in statute defining young people's influence on decision-making about their own cases and their plans for the future, including their ability to choose other supportive adults to participate.
2. Include tougher mandates for facilitating "normalcy" – making it financially and legally possible for youth in foster care to do more of the "normal" things that other kids can do, like spending the night at friends' houses, going on overnight field trips, etc.

Young people want more opportunities to build college and career success. Access to higher education for youth in foster care has been a priority in Michigan, and many universities and community colleges have developed successful initiatives to recruit and retain this population. This is to be celebrated, but certainly isn't available consistently around the state, and is not an option for kids who don't get their high school diploma and/or don't get the grades in high school to move directly into some post-secondary options. Further, mandates requiring local workforce development agencies to prioritize services for youth in foster care are in place, but are not consistently successful throughout the state.

Related Policy Recommendation:

1. Support state and federal initiatives that limit the cost of post-secondary education for all vulnerable populations.
2. Ensure that young people receive a high school credential or are on a solid career path before exiting foster care.
3. Review and support community or regional practices that contribute to successful employment and career opportunities for youth in foster care.

Current outcomes for young people who have been involved in the foster care system are unacceptable. While we are making strides in how we serve the young people under our guardianship, we are still not successful enough. Additional resources have been dedicated to youth in foster care over the past several years, but many of the barriers to success raised by young people are a result of a lack of resources. Other states have reinvested funds saved as a result of fewer institutional placements into other resources specific to maintaining adoptive and foster home placements and independent living for young people. Multiple sectors must work together to make sure that under our care, young people are better able to rebuild what has been lost and move successfully toward supporting themselves and their own families now and in the future.