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RELEASE: Jan. 19, 2015

Foster Teens to Testify at Michigan's Children's *KidSpeak* Program before Oakland County Board on Jan. 26, 2015

PONTIAC -- On average, 12 children from Oakland, Macomb and Wayne counties enter the foster care system each day. What are their experiences? How are their lives and futures shaped by their care as wards of the state? What happens when they age out?

For the 13,500 children in foster care in Michigan, of which nearly 40 percent come from Greater Detroit, growing up without a permanent home or parents holds unique challenges with lifelong consequences – among them, achieving a high school diploma and post-secondary education, teen pregnancy and contacts with the juvenile justice system. These issues plus a strong focus on educational concerns will be explored at the annual *KidSpeak* event featuring real-life stories of foster kids and adult foster children on **Jan. 26, 2015 from 6-8 p.m.**

Testimony will be heard by a listening panel of state and county policymakers including members of the state Board of Education at the **Oakland County Commissioners' Auditorium, 1200 N. Telegraph Rd., Pontiac, MI 48341**. The meeting is co-hosted by Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson, Oakland County Commissioner Janet Jackson, former Commissioner Mattie Hatchett, State Rep. Jim Runestad and State Sen. Dave Robertson.

The goal of the public meeting is to help bring about improved public policies for Michigan's foster care system.

"In order to support, care, protect and prepare children and youth in child welfare, all stakeholders have to increase youth voice and meaningful participation in the policies that affect them, to ensure lasting and sustainable solutions," said Saba Gebrai, director of Blue Babies of Park West Foundation, a group devoted to youths who were in the child welfare system.

"At Michigan's Children, we're optimistic that this very important *KidSpeak* program spurs state Legislators to hold meaningful discussions around changes to improve outcomes for thousands of youth in state care," said Matt Gillard, CEO & President of Michigan's Children, a primary sponsor.

“As the new Legislative session gets underway, and with the release of Gov. Snyder’s 2016 budget and his State of the State address, all this month, this is a critical time to look at ways to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and youth,” he added. “We’re also hopeful new legislative champions emerge, as did former Oakland County Commissioner Runestad, now a House representative, last year to help drive necessary policy changes that will make a difference.”

In recent years, the state Department of Human Services, which oversees the foster care system, has been headed by Maura Corrigan, a former Supreme Court justice credited for improving child welfare in Michigan. Those changes stemmed from a 2008 federal consent degree following accusations that the state failed to protect children from abuse. In her tenure, Corrigan oversaw the hiring of in-state graduates to improve the program. She resigned in December and has been replaced temporarily by Michigan Department of Community Health Director Nick Lyon.

Children and teens in foster care generally face harsher outcomes than those in the general population:

- A quarter of foster youth do not graduate on time from high school or receive a GED (compared to 13 percent of the general population);
- 71 percent of females become pregnant at least once before age 21 (compared to 34 percent in the general population);
- And males are four times and females 10 times more likely to have ever been arrested than the general population.

KidSpeak® is a signature event of Michigan’s Children. Since 1993, Michigan’s Children has served as a statewide independent and nonpartisan voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children and youth from cradle to career.

Park West Foundation has been dedicated to innovative and creative solutions for youth aging out of foster care in Michigan since 2006, where youth voice guides the foundation’s priorities and youth group, the Blue Babies.

Foster Care Alumni of America-Michigan Chapter seeks to connect the alumni community to transform policy and practice, ensuring opportunity for people in and from foster care.

The Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI) program was created to improve outcomes for youths transitioning from foster care to adulthood. MYOI's goal is to ensure that young people in foster care have successful outcomes in housing, education, employment, community engagement and health.