



Public policy in the best interest of children

Date: November 4, 2015
To: Members of the House Families, Children and Seniors Committee
From: Matt Gillard, President & CEO
matt@michiganschildren.org or (517) 485-3500
Re: House Bills 4976, 4977 and 4978 – Children’s Assurance of Quality Foster Care

First, we applaud the efforts of this committee and the bill sponsors, some of whom have been working on this legislation for some time. It is a great start to codify support for Michigan’s compliance with federal law and to better assess where increased service investments need to be made – to support both the children and youth involved in the state’s care, as well as the caregivers in all settings who provide for them.

Many of you have been involved with us in recent opportunities to hear directly from young people currently and formerly in the foster care system, as well as foster, kinship and adoptive caregivers of some of those young people. Everyone in this room is well aware of the barriers faced by these young people and families, as well as what remain dismal educational and life outcomes for too many of them. Our comments today reflect issues that have been brought to us in those forums from all areas of the state and for some, over many years.

We support HBs 4976, 4977 and 4978 before you today, but have a few specific recommendations for your consideration, and will leave you with some suggestions for moving further in the future.

- We ask that the “as soon as practicable” timeliness standard for services be further defined, and that there be annual independent review to identify and address service delays and gaps in services across the state.** A common theme that we have heard from both young people and caregivers is the lack of immediate access to essential services, including basic needs like housing and physical or mental health services. While it is clear that there are existing standards of timeliness of care, and that the bill language is consistent with other policy and procedure, essential services are not always accessible when they are needed, through no fault of the child or caregiver and creating needless gaps in services.
- We recommend that the onus of responsibility for complaint monitoring and follow up are with the system, rather than the child in the final grievance procedure negotiated.** Another theme that we hear is that young people in care don’t see evidence of recourse for their complaints. While this bill does provide a statutory basis for grievances, the onus for moving issues of concern forward lies solely on the young person involved. This seems a needless responsibility for the child, when it is really the system that bears the parental responsibility. We

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would recommend that once a complaint has been made, the Office of the Family Advocate should be immediately notified and should take responsibility for monitoring timely response and working with the young person to review and evaluate corrective action taken by the agency to determine when further steps are necessary.

3. In order to maximize the positive impact of the Children's Assurance of Quality Foster Care requirements, **we would recommend the addition of specific reporting requirements that would include information about complaints and corrective actions taken.** We recommend that this reporting be made available to an independent evaluator like the Children's Ombudsman's Office who already serves a similar purpose for the Department. The information would allow the Department and the Legislature to clearly pull out recommendations for policy changes and service and training investments necessary to fully adhere to the statute.

And, finally, we would like to support the Committee's efforts to use this conversation as a spring board to address many other serious issues faced by children and youth in our care. We commend improvements that have been made and are being made under the settlement agreement, through the state waiver process and through Departmental leadership, but recognize that outcomes continue to fall short of what we want to see for all of the children, youth and families under our care. We look forward to working with you on these and many other critical areas for change that are guided by the experiences of young people and their caregivers:

1. Young people are often not able to finish high school and move onto post-secondary paths because they aren't able to remain in a school setting long enough to accumulate credits, or because their credits don't effectively transfer to their new schools. In addition, often young people are not receiving needed supplemental assistance because they are not appropriately identified for services. While Michigan has been improving, several other states do a better job of cross-system tracking and assessing the educational success of children and youth in their systems, and because of this are better able to direct investments to support them through K-12 and beyond.
2. All young people are facing increasing barriers to independence as they move into adulthood, whether in the foster care system or not. Despite the increased availability of services to young people beyond age 18 due to additional federal investment over the last few years, young people who still need system support, whether or not they choose to receive it, are falling through the cracks at this transition. We have heard from many young people that this causes unnecessary gaps in services available to them, including timely support for housing and other basic assistance. States take different approaches to transition resulting in more seamless services through age 21, often utilizing additional state investment to support their approaches.
3. Parents have many different barometers for determining when they stop helping their children. For some, they are helping provide health care coverage through age 26, for others, they are providing shelter and other supports well beyond their children's 21st birthdays. For others, they help with the costs of college or other post-secondary training options at the point where their children can take full advantage, not based arbitrarily on some age cut off. In order to be the best parents we can be to the young people in our care, Michigan needs to remove some of our arbitrary age limits, and instead design programs that can build educational and life success for more young people currently and formerly in the foster care system.

Thank you.