

# Youths complain foster system hinders sibling ties

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(Photo: Gary Malerba / Special to The Detroit News)

Kyrstin Hale went months, sometimes up to a year, without speaking with her 15-year-old sister, Kaitlynn.

That didn't come by choice, she says. It started when the 19-year-old entered the foster care system at 15.

"It makes me upset," Hale said. "Every time she calls me she's crying, and I can't help her. I'm the only one she talks to who is family."

Hale and Wayne State University's [Transition to Independence Program](http://www.tipwaynestate.org/) (<http://www.tipwaynestate.org/>) are hoping to improve the foster care system by sharing the experiences of foster youths, several of whom said they have gone months without seeing their siblings.

Hale said communication between foster care system staff has made it difficult to contact her sister. She added the need for a supervisor when they meet in person also complicates things.

TIP also advocates for legislation that would increase foster youths' access to higher education, protect them from identity fraud and keep them with family.

Hale is part of the extended foster care system and is living on WSU's campus this summer until she starts school there at the end of the month under the TIP program.

"We seek to normalize the playing field and provide them the same experience as other students," said Angelique Day, assistant professor and TIP's founding director.

Sibling visitation is a frequent concern at TIP's annual KidSpeak, an event designed to provide foster youths ages 16 to 24 an opportunity to share their thoughts on what can be improved during the transition from high school to college and employment, Day said. The issue was brought up again Monday at its third KidSpeak event.

Amendments to Michigan law were enacted in July and early August requiring the state to try to keep siblings together and provide once a month visitation for those who are separated in the system. This has been Department of Health and Human Services policy, but codifying it ensures the policy's stability and enforcement, said state Sen. Rick Jones, R-Grand Ledge.

"Many times polices are not followed, but the law must be followed," said Jones, who sponsored one of the amendments. "I think it's critically important to keep siblings together if at all possible ... and if they can't be together, we want to ensure frequent visitation."

Hale's story is like that of several who spoke at KidSpeak 2016 in a legislative-style hearing at WSU before about 30 representatives from nonprofits, the university, DHHS and the offices of U.S. Reps. John Conyers and Sander Levin and U.S. Sen. Gary Peters, said Megan Pennefather, WSU campus coach.

Although passing a law that requires sibling visitation is a step forward, Pennefather said when a youth is adopted the child's siblings cannot get updates or any more information, making it difficult to stay connected to family members. Hale added that families can be further disrupted when youths age out of the system and struggle with accessing resources to help them live on their own.

Kevin Riedel of Detroit said he was homeless and hungry before learning about programs available to former foster youth that help with rent, tuition, car payments and laptop costs. The 22-year-old emphasized the need for better communication with youths about available programs.

Riedel entered the system at 13 as a 4.0 student. Being shuffled between several homes and schools, however, made him fall behind, he said. Riedel dropped out of school at 16 but eventually got his GED at 17. Now, he plans to graduate from WSU with two bachelor's degrees by May.

"(The foster care system) taught me to desire to never give up," Riedel said. "I can't give up because I want to show these other youths that we can have a better foster care system."

Jennifer Wrayno, DHHS business service center director for urban child welfare, said her department strives to maintain stability for foster youths and has policies to keep them in contact with family and friends.

"We took to heart everything they had to say," Wrayno said. "We're always looking for opportunities to do better."

Levin said in a statement he hopes the Senate will pass the Family First Prevention Services Act, legislation that incentivizes states to keep foster children with their families. The House passed it in June with a voice vote.

"The bottom line is that our system failed many of these kids, first by not helping their families so they could stay safely at home, and then by not providing them with the support they needed after they entered foster care," Levin said in an email. "These amazing youth overcame those failures, but they shouldn't have had to."

Peters has sponsored several pieces of legislation concerning the foster care system, according to the senator's office. He said in a statement he is committed to the success of children in Michigan, including its foster youth.

Pennefather said KidSpeak gives foster youth a voice that many feel they haven't had before.

"Getting students to speak isn't easy," she said. "When they can speak to especially DHHS officials and hear the response — 'I hear you' — I think that's very empowering."

Riedel said he plans to run for a position on Detroit City Council in 2017 to help others in the system: "If I want to see change, I've got to do it myself."

"I hope to see a lot more foster youth with their siblings," Riedel said.

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