



## Caregivers Share Heartbreak to Move Solutions Forward

**Lansing, Michigan** -- Emotion-filled words tumbled from the mouths of foster parents and stung the ears and hearts of those gathered Tuesday, Feb. 28, in the Speaker's Library at the State Capitol:

"Trauma."

"Abandoned."

Heads nodded in agreement and tears were shed as men and women told a roomful of lawmakers, staff, caregivers and others what had brought them into the child welfare system and how their expectations differed from their reality of foster parenting and adoption. They described the challenges they faced, and made recommendations for changes in policies and programs to make the system work better for their families and others. The event was hosted by Michigan's Children, the only statewide independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children and their families.

Each speaker began by telling how they are trying to help children deal with the scars left by physical and emotional abuse; untreated or undiagnosed conditions such as autism and depression; and uncontrollable emotional and physical outbursts. They described a system that didn't help them and how that left them frustrated, exhausted and feeling that nobody cares.

**Remove Cross-County Barriers to Services:** Carie Coscarelli from Oakland County spoke of her family story. When they decided to adopt, they found a girl from Wayne County who seemed a perfect fit for their family. But they faced obstacles from the beginning. They were told that prior to the girl moving in they would have access to family counseling but were never given the resources to make that happen, nor did insurance transfer for needed therapy. "The girl went from having therapy four days a week to having no therapy for seven weeks," said Coscarelli.

Her adoption agency, warned that even services for severe cases could be delayed for several months because they had adopted a child from another county. "There's always a fight over who pays for services," she said.

"Meanwhile, our household was in a freefall as the child's behavior began to rapidly decline."

In four weeks they spent 40 hours in hospitals in both Oakland and Wayne Counties trying to get her help, she said, and it took its toll. "I am positive that this is not the way the system was intended to be. It became a horrible strain on ourselves and our child." Their adoption failed, and they had to have their child removed from their care.

“This is heartbreaking for everyone involved. We were ready, willing and able to help her but were not properly supported.”

The suggestions for repair. Make sure that all adoptive families have needed services in place prior to placing a child regardless of where the child or parents have lived. And two, “Have a roundtable of high-quality workers, family and system engineers to totally overhaul this broken system.”

**Continued Support for Caregivers:** Veda Thomkins, of Wayne County, and Tracey DeFeyter, of Isabella County, joined Ashley Allen, of Genesee County, in calling for high-quality respite opportunities and parent-to-parent support groups for kin, foster and adoptive parents.

**Access to Timely Services:** Julie Schnell, of Saginaw, joined with Coscarelli and several others in identifying the need for funded early services. She also called for reimbursement for quality daycare services. To stabilize placements for children, families clearly articulated the need services to be available to them and their children immediately, not within allowable timelines.

**Better Coordination With the Courts:** Allen Nehring, of Midland County, and Danielle Dickson, of Tuscola County, both called for better pay for and closer monitoring of legal guardian ad litem (LGALs). Dickson described a case in which a LGAL had allowed the children of a family to live in an unsafe placement and Nehring blames the lack of communication from the LGAL in his case for his foster child being moved from their home despite support for the placement from relatives and DHHS.

Legislators listened and pledged action. Rep. Jim Runestad, R-White Lake, expressed the continuing need for the FamilySpeak foster care event.

“We really need to hear from the parents and find out what the problems are (in the foster care system). If we are going to have a successful program here in Michigan, we have to fix these problems so that we are recruiting and keeping these foster care parents.

Rep. Robert Kosowski, D-Westland, said, “I will do anything I can to make this system better. This cannot be partisan.”

The two lawmakers and foster parents joined with more than a dozen other listeners from the Congress, the Legislature, the Department of Health and Human Services and other interested policy and program partners at the event.

Michigan’s Children and our recruitment partners are building an agenda for action for 2017, based on this FamilySpeak testimony.