

KidSpeak: Champions for Children in Foster Care

Monday, August 7, 2017

Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights, Wayne State University

Michigan's Children and our recruitment partners, Wayne State University's Transition to Independence Program (TIP Wayne State), were joined by a panel of federal, state, and local officials at our 4th KidSpeak at Wayne State focused on the experience of young people who have transitioned out of foster care. TIP Wayne State co-hosted the event.

Eight young adults – all of them with experience in the foster care system – spoke to the listeners about systemic issues, highlighting barriers to achieving independence and opportunities to improve and expand effective programs. The youth made recommendations for changes in policies and programs to make the system work better for youth, for families, and for caregivers.

Each youth had their own unique story, but speakers generally reflected the following ideas:

- 1. Expand eligibility and streamline benefits to ensure a smoother transition:** Several speakers spoke about how funds for foster-affiliated youth are insufficient to support a meaningful transition to independent adulthood, especially for young parents. Students praised the support provided by Young Adult Voluntary Foster Care (YVAC), but asked to eliminate opt-in requirements so that youth are not hurt by delays in service.
- 2. Build the capacity of caseworkers and foster parents:** Several speakers spoke about the need to lighten the caseload of caseworkers in the foster system. Others spoke about the need to help caseworkers better identify trauma. They also talked asked for more training and information for foster parents before any youth enter their care, specifically around what basic goods and services children and youth need to grow and learn.
- 3. Capitalize on the knowledge and experience of older youth in the foster system:** Older foster-affiliated youth have a wealth of wisdom to share with younger children and child welfare professionals. Young people inquired about how to better utilize the experience of youth who have been involved in the foster care system, including establishing peer groups where older foster-affiliated youth mentoring younger ones with scholarship incentives.
- 4. Youth need more postsecondary and housing support:** Speakers pointed out that most foster care benefits are directed towards youth entering higher education, but there is little support for those who may not follow this path. Speakers also noted that access to safe, stable, and affordable housing remains a critical and fundamental problem for many foster-affiliated youth and that without housing, a successful transition to adulthood is incredibly difficult.

In order to improve youth outcomes, we need to support youth leaving foster care for the full duration of their transition. This conversation is timely. As evidenced by increased momentum for a Foster Quality Assurance Act and the influx of state funding into the Michigan Youth Opportunities

Initiative, there is broad understanding that more needs to be done. To support youth transitions from foster care most effectively, we need to hear from them directly about their experiences, their successes and their recommendations for improvements in our current systems. And, we need to use what we learn to build better policy and practice.

Youth were joined by the following listeners:

Elected Officials and Staff:

Brenda Lawrence, Congresswoman
Staff, Ian Conyers, State Senator
Staff, Bert Johnson, State Senator
Kevin Hertel, State Representative
Adam Zemke, State Representative
Staff, Jim Runestad, State Representative
Ray Basham, Wayne County Commissioner
Tom McMillin, State Board of Education
Michelle Fecteau, State Board of Education
Virgil Smith, Wayne County Judge

State and Local Government Representatives:

Michigan State Board of Education
Michigan Department of Health and Human Services
Wayne County Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative

Other Advocacy Partners:

Angela Aufdemberge, Vista Maria
Black Family Development Institute
Children's Center
Christ Child House
Detroit Employment Solutions Corporation
Elizabeth Bauer, former member, State Board of Education
Foster Care Alumni of America, Michigan Chapter
Wayne State University, School of Law
Wayne State University, School of Social Work
Wayne State Warrior Vision Impact Program (Warrior VIP)

This KidSpeak has been made possible by the voices of the youth supported through the following partners:

The Wayne State Transition to Independence Program (TIP) provides trauma-informed wrap-around services, including coaching, academic services, case management, and emergency funds to youth who have a history with the foster care system (after age 13) and are pursuing a Bachelor's degree at Wayne State University.

Michigan's Children Michigan's Children is the only statewide independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children from cradle to career and their families. Our emphasis is on influencing public policies that close equity gaps and ensure that the children and youth who face the most

challenges have the supports they need to succeed in school and life. By working to reform public policy, we improve the odds for all children, and support the work of those who provide services that help individual children overcome the odds. We have been creating opportunities for young people, parents and other community members to share their stories, concerns and suggestions directly with policymakers since 1996, and continue to find new ways to provide young people, families and the supporting professionals around them the tools that they need to advocate on their own behalf.

Kidspeak® is a youth public forum that empowers young people to advocate on their own behalf. Operating on a statewide and local basis, Kidspeak brings youth before listening panels comprised of legislators, other public officials, and community leaders to talk about issues of concern to them. Kidspeak forums provide young people with authentic civic engagement experience and to provide policymakers the rare opportunity to hear the voices of young people. Given the opportunity, in ways both poignant and powerful, youths can change the way adults make decisions. Michigan's Children, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, presents Kidspeak as a non-partisan activity. Kidspeak is a registered trademark of Michigan's Children.

For more information about this KidSpeak or other opportunities to hear directly from young people or their families, please contact Michele Corey, Vice President for Programs, at 517-648-5498 or michele@michiganschildren.org.