



October 16, 2017

### **Critical Issues in Foster Care: Federal Update OCTOBER**

Critical discussions continue around health care, the federal budget and the debt ceiling in Washington DC that will impact children, youth and families around the state and nation, holding particular risk in Michigan as a state that relies more heavily on federal funding than many others. However, the focus on those important conversations have kept efforts for bipartisan solutions to other critical problems out of the public eye.

Over the summer, a team of US Representatives led one such effort to address specific issues in the foster care community. Five bills passed nearly unanimously out of the House of Representatives that aim to continue the progress begun in conversations around the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2016 that would have finalized a long-awaited shift in foster care policy towards more support for prevention services. However, the bill never received a vote in the Senate. This year's bills keep the federal foster care conversation going and touch on key issues that have been identified by foster care-affiliated youth in Michigan.

**Young people talk about the need for support as they enter adulthood.** When young people in foster care age out of the system, their needs don't age out with them. Young people who have faced adversity deserve to be cared for as they manage the delicate transition to adult life, fraught as it is with a labyrinth of incoherent rules and program requirements sometimes guarding access to the most basic of care. Health care costs for youth experiencing foster care are higher than other young adults due to the trauma related to their placement in care and the lack of stability once there. In addition, when leaving the system comes the possibility of leaving their home state, foster youth need the opportunity to be covered by health insurance independent of where they reside.

[HR 2847](#), the Improving Services for Older Youth in Foster Care Act, would allow states to both extend foster care benefits to youths who have aged out of foster care until their 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday and to increase the eligibility age for educational and training voucher programs to 25. Michigan currently allows service provision up to age 21 and would be allowed to opt into this increased eligibility but would not likely choose that option.

**Young people also talk about the need for opportunities to be with family members, even in the most difficult situations.** Perhaps the most divisive, emotionally-charged question in the foster care space is that of what role the birth parents and siblings of a child in foster care should play in that child's life from the moment that child enters the system. Furthermore, children speak about the benefits from increased access to direct care provided by extended family members and the need to facilitate more successful placements with extended family.

[HR 2857](#), the Supporting Families in Substance Abuse Treatment Act, permits a year of support payments for a child in foster care who is placed with a parent in a residential, family-based treatment facility. This bill could make it easier for service providers in Michigan to implement two-generation strategies that prevent cases of child abuse and neglect and allow children and youth to remain with their strengthened families.

[HR 2866](#), the Reducing Barriers for Relative Foster Parents Act, allows states to waive non-safety standards for relative foster family caregivers, removing some requirements that relatives must satisfy before becoming a licensed foster parent in Michigan.

[HR 2834](#), Partnership Grants to Strengthen Families Affected by Parental Substance Abuse Act, puts aside existing federal funds to fund prevention services and improve the well-being of families and children affected by substance abuse. These funds could aid Michigan's efforts to prevent the growing statewide epidemic of substance abuse, with a focus on the well-being of children and youth at-risk.

Another bill is moving alongside the four above:

[HR 2742](#), the Modernizing the Interstate Placement of Children in Foster care Act, requires states to take steps to modernize their child placement systems to make interstate placements more timely, reducing the time a child might spend in bureaucratic limbo.

The bills are now before the Senate Finance Committee, where Michigan Senator Debbie Stabenow is the ranking minority member. Michigan's congressional delegation almost unanimously supported the bills.

**ACTION NEEDED:** Thank members of our Congressional Delegation that supported the bills, and urge Senate committee action.

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While the five bills above are the furthest along in the process right now, there are quite a few other important bills that support foster-affiliated youth that have been introduced in the 115th Congress, some with bipartisan support. Communication with all Michigan U.S. Representatives and Senators is essential, and many delegation members serve on key committees referenced in the recommended actions that follow:

**Senate Finance and Agriculture Committees:** Sen. Debbie Stabenow

**House Ways and Means Committee:** Reps. Mike Bishop and Sander Levin

**House Education and the Workforce Committee:** Reps. Tim Walberg and Paul Mitchell.

**House Energy and Commerce Committee:** Reps. Fred Upton, Tim Walberg and Debbie Dingell

**House Judiciary Committee:** Rep. John Conyers

[HR 1757](#), Trauma-Informed Care for Children and Families Act, referred to the Committees on Education and the Workforce, Energy and Commerce, Ways and Means, and the Judiciary; introduced in the Senate as [SB 774](#), referred to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. These bills

would address the psychological, developmental, social, and emotional needs of children, youth, and families who have experienced trauma through the following efforts:

- Identify best practices by creating an interagency federal task force to coordinate efforts and establish best practices for identifying and supporting children that have experienced trauma;
- Disseminate best practices by creating an eligible use of funding for several federal grant programs to be used for trauma training across disciplines.
- Train key stakeholders by creating coordinating centers that will share information, improve awareness, and enhance training on trauma's impact;
- Test new models by increasing funding for the National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative;
- Improve understanding of trauma by requiring improved data collection on trauma prevalence and studies to identify barriers to coordination;
- Expand treatment capacity by testing expanded Medicaid coverage of child trauma services, and expanding mental health care in schools;
- Support workforce development by expanding loan repayment programs, developing training guidelines for non-clinical providers, and improving pre-service training; and
- Foster community coordination by creating a grant program to bring together stakeholders to identify needs, collect data, and target efforts, and pools federal grants to focus funding on increasing trauma services for children and families.

**ACTION NEEDED:** Thank Senator Gary Peters for co-sponsoring the legislation and ask other Representatives and Senators to co-sponsor; urge House committee action.

[HB 2236](#): Foster and Homeless Youth Food Security Act, referred to the Agriculture Committee. The bill would provide certain alternative eligibility requirements for SNAP benefits applicable to foster care youth, and homeless youth, who are enrolled at least half-time in an institution of higher education. The bill could be included in the FARM bill reauthorization.

**ACTION NEEDED:** Ask Senators to introduce a companion bill in the Senate. Ask Representatives to co-sponsor.

[HR 2512](#): Foster Youth and Driving Act, referred to the House Ways and Means Committee, co-sponsored by U.S. Representative Debbie Dingell. The bill would amend title IV of the Social Security Act to expand foster parent training and provide new appropriations to support the obtainment of a driver's license. This bill could be part of the reauthorization of Chafee Independence Act.

**ACTION NEEDED:** Thank Representative Debbie Dingell for co-sponsoring the legislation, ask other Representatives to co-sponsor; and urge House committee action. Senator Debbie Stabenow has agreed to introduce a companion bill in the Senate, but no date for introduction has been set.

[HR 2681](#): Foster EITC Act, referred to the House Committee on Ways and Means. This bill would increase the age range at which the earned income tax credit is allowed to former foster children and other individuals without qualifying children. Current law requires beneficiaries to be age 25 and older (unless you have minor dependents). There is some threat to the EITC entirely this year.

**ACTION NEEDED:** Ask Senators to introduce a companion bill in the Senate. Ask Representatives to co-sponsor the legislation, and urge committee action.

[HR 2682](#): Supporting Foster Youth in Successful Parenting Act, referred to the House Education and the Workforce and Ways and Means Committees. This bill provides new grants to support the development of foster youth-specific sex education curriculum to prevent teen pregnancy, and provides supports for those who are pregnant and parenting. Specifically, it would prevent the state from removing infants from their teen moms and placing them in foster care, or would encourage foster care placements to keep moms and babies together by increasing the infant supplement to match what foster parents receive for caring for their teen moms.

**ACTION NEEDED:** Ask U. S. Senators to introduce a companion bill in the Senate. Ask U. S. Representatives to co-sponsor the legislation and urge committee action.

[HR 2476](#): Adoption Tax Credit Refundability Act, referred to the House Committee on Ways and Means; introduced in the Senate as [S.937](#), referred to the Senate Finance Committee. The bills would amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to provide for a refundable adoption tax credit.

**ACTION NEEDED:** Thank Representative Debbie Dingell for co-sponsoring the legislation and ask other Senators and Representatives to co-sponsor; and urge Senate and House committee action.

[HR 3418](#): Fostering Academic Information and Resources (FAIR) Act, referred to the House Committee on Ways and Means. The bill would require States to inform children in foster care, ages 14 and above, of all government financial aid programs for expenses related to higher education.

**ACTION NEEDED:** Thank Representative Brenda Lawrence for introducing the bill. Ask Senators to introduce a companion bill in the Senate. Ask Representatives to co-sponsor the legislation and urge committee action.

[HR 3740](#), the Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act (HEASHFY), referred to the House Committee on Education and the Workforce; introduced in the Senate as [S 1795](#), referred to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. These bills require higher educational institutions to provide a specific contact person to work with foster and homeless youth to access financial aid, ensure academic support, access community resources, and develop a housing plan during and between terms. The bill will also:

- Streamline the homeless verification process by allowing homeless service providers the right to verify youth as homeless and unaccompanied, allowing youth to have quicker access and fewer barriers to financial aid.
- Not require foster and homeless status to be re-determined every year.
- Allow homeless and foster youth to access in-state tuition regardless of where they aged out.
- Provide care to former foster care youth who left the system at age 13 or older due to permanency arrangements.

**ACTION NEEDED:** Ask House and Senate members to co-sponsor their chamber's version of the bill and urge committee action.

[HR 3742](#), the Fostering Success in Higher Education Act, referred to the Committee on Education and the Workforce; introduced in the Senate as [S 1992](#), referred to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. These bills create grant programs that establish opportunities to increase access to higher education for homeless and foster youth. In order to increase access, the bill requires states to provide assistance with applications for higher education, financial aid, and scholarships. 70% of grant funds are required to provide homeless and foster students with costs associated with housing, enrollment fees, orientation costs, and other fees not covered by financial aid.

**ACTION NEEDED:** Ask House and Senate members to co-sponsor their chamber's version of the bill and urge committee action.

[S 1797](#): Health Insurance for Former Foster Youth Act, referred to the Senate Finance Committee. This bill would provide Medicaid coverage to former foster children until their 26th birthday, regardless of which state they aged out in. This bill also allows access to Medicaid for former foster youth who left the system as early as 14 to be placed with a legal guardian. State Medicaid programs would be required to establish outreach and enrollment programs through child welfare agencies through this bill.

**ACTION NEEDED:** Urge Senators to co-sponsor the legislation and urge committee action through Senator Debbie Stabenow. Ask Representatives to introduce a companion bill in the House.

*Michigan's Children has been creating opportunities for young people to share their stories, concerns, and ideas directly with decision makers in public policy since 1996. Many of these conversations have included the voices of young people currently or formerly served by the state's foster care system. We believe that opening up the policymaking process to the knowledge and insight of those most directly affected by the system – children, youth and families themselves – will help policy makers identify where current policy isn't working well and champion solutions for the 13,000 children under the state's care.*