

Successful Foster Care Transitions: Addressing Homelessness, Expanding MYOI and Improving Fostering Futures

All young people face barriers to independence as they move into adulthood, whether in the foster care system or not. Studies show that most young adults are dependent on their parents until their late 20's. When young people leave foster care, many have not had the kind of experiences and successes that will help in their transition. Some have no one to help, resulting in discouraging outcomes including more homelessness, early pregnancies, risk for human trafficking, involvement in the justice system, and fewer high school and college graduates. These children and youth rely on the state to invest in their futures, and we are currently letting far too many fall through the cracks.

Too many youth find themselves alone without support, sometimes fleeing bad situations at home with parents or other caregivers, sometimes identified by schools and others as needing some stability and assistance. State funding for the network of providers serving homeless and runaway youth has not increased since 2001, despite the significant increases in requests for services and challenges faced by youth, including human trafficking and mental health or substance misuse problems for themselves and their caregivers. This has resulted in gaps in services around the state.

The Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI) serves young people, ages 14-21, currently or formerly in foster care. Despite funding for staff and the success of local MYOI programs in leveraging public and private funding through philanthropy and local business, due to a lack of resources not all young people can take advantage of the following services through this program: the Opportunity Passport™ that includes financial investment and literacy, life skills, and other training and support; community discounts to necessities and services; mentoring and coaching; and youth boards where youth are trained in leadership and communication skills.

To try to mitigate the gaps in skill building beyond high school for these young people who are far less likely to begin or complete postsecondary training and credentials, there has been increasing federal and philanthropic investment in scholarship programs. Michigan's budget also supports the Fostering Futures Scholarship (FFS) that supports 400 students who have experienced foster care with undergraduate tuition, room and board, and books and supplies.

The Governor included flat funding for all three of these critical supports in his FY19 budget recommendations, and the Legislature is currently developing their own state budget priorities.

Recommendations:

1. Increase current investments in MYOI to ensure access to full programming for every eligible young person around the state. In addition to statewide staffing, an increase in service funding is essential, that when combined with private philanthropy and federal investment can provide those evaluated, effective services to every young person in Michigan who can take advantage of them.
2. Maintain funding for Fostering Futures Scholarship and consider adjustments to the program to remove age and time requirements and provide more flexibility how it is able to fill expense gaps and support a wider range of educational options.
3. Increase funding for community organizations supporting homeless and runaway youth (many who are currently in the foster care system, and others at risk.)
4. Explore investment mechanisms to end the funding cliff between traditional foster care and extended foster care for 18-21-year-olds, including more outreach, tracking and commitment to services for young adults until they have some independent stability in education, housing and employment.