

# Capital News Service

## Foster kids' stories inspire moves to reform

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Capital News Service

LANSING – The number of Michigan children in the state's foster care system is at its lowest in almost a decade, but anecdotes from kids within the system have legislators considering bipartisan reform.

First term Rep. Jim Runestad, a Republican from White Lake, said he has spoken to Rep. John Chirkun, a Democrat from Roseville, about working together to improve the foster care system. Chirkun could not be reached for comment.

About 18 foster children told legislators recently about their experiences in the system, highlighting issues such as sibling separation and limited resources available once they age out of the system.

The children told their stories through an event called KidSpeak, organized by the nonprofit Michigan's Children to help young people directly address legislators on issues affecting them.

"It's impossible for anybody to listen to the stories that these kids have to tell and not be moved by it – not be moved to act," said Michigan's Children President and CEO Matt Gillard.

Since the most recent KidSpeak event in Oakland County, Gillard said, "We've had a number of legislators coming to us ... wanting to know how they can help resolve some of the issues the kids have."

Runestad's interest in the issue is both a matter of public policy and personal investment. He and his wife have been long-time foster carers and now have a daughter they adopted out of the system.

There are 13,141 kids in foster care in Michigan. This follows an eight-year downward trend since the state peaked in 2008 with nearly 19,000 kids in care and drew federal criticism.

Currently the state's foster care system is subject to court-ordered federal oversight, a result of a 2008 lawsuit filed by the national watchdog organization Children's Rights, which said the case loads were too high and not enough children were finding permanent homes.

A press release on the Children's Rights website said the Department of Human Services' focus on improving hiring rates, training and case allocation has led to a significant improvement in the caseloads of child welfare staff.

But the group also points out that, according to the May 2014 Monitoring Report by Public Catalyst, many problem areas in the state's performance remain.

According to the report, by the end of June 2013 more than 4,600 children in custody were placed with their relatives by DHS. More than 60 percent of those homes were unlicensed. The average length of stay for young children in shelters exceeds the federal requirements.

The report also states 152 children were abused or neglected in foster care during 2013.

Despite these numbers, Stacie Bladen, deputy director of children's services administration for the Department of Human Services, said Michigan's foster care system is now seeing far more positive results, with more kids leaving the system than entering.

Bladen said the state is on track to seeing the end of federal oversight.

"We're very, very interested in having our child welfare system back under full control," Bladen said. "I think that we have demonstrated significant progress on the majority of items set out in front of us."

Michigan's Children said the state has improved over the years, but Gillard was hesitant to say whether the state's foster care system should be allowed out from under the federal eye.

"I don't know if I can really comment on that, but I do think that there are a lot of things Michigan could be doing better and should be doing better to help meet the needs of the kids in the foster care system and as they age out of it," Gillard said.

Runestad, who helped sponsor the recent KidSpeak, said some of the focus areas for foster kids this year are caseworker confidence, sibling separation, too many moves and limited

options for young people who age out of the system. He wants to make these issues a legislative priority, looking at how best practices in some areas can be spread more widely.

“There are certainly areas in the system that are in need of improvement,” Runestad said. “I want to really drill down below the surface to see what we can do to make things better.”

A number of the speakers, Runestad said, described instances where stories told in confidence were spread throughout the department. One girl, who was moved 15 times in one year, complained about a lack of continuity that caused academic struggles.

“There were some very heartbreaking stories about what their parents had done to them, about what foster care had done to them,” he said. “But there were almost as many cases of them saying that foster care literally saved their lives.”

Runestad said the event had a marked impression on the eight legislators in attendance.

Bladen said it was an honor to hear the stories and acknowledged the need for an emphasis on sibling connection and older youth services. But she pointed out that in regards to youth services, Michigan is considered a leading state.

“We’re doing a lot around that; we do have some supports in place for older foster care kids in Michigan,” Bladen said. “Could we do more? Sure.”

Michigan has the sixth biggest foster care system in the country, and all sides are quick to acknowledge the system is a complex one.

Nick Lyon, who has been named to run a combined Department of Health and Human Services in Michigan, said in an interview that some counties do a better job at handling issues in foster care than others.

Bladen said there were many factors that cause differences in the number of children entering into the system in the counties.

“I know there are differences in county removal rates,” she said. “A different court, a different county, may differ in their perspective as to whether a child should be removed or not.”

“Looking both at exits and entries, we have more kids exiting than entering, and that’s a good thing. In the past five years we have focused on assisting our families and our youth in achieving permanency.”

Bladen added the DHS’s focus on preventive care has had a huge impact on the numbers.

Both Runestad and Gillard said that, while the state might be doing more, it still isn’t doing

enough.

“I would agree with DHS that certain counties handle it differently than others, but I would also add to that: The state has an obligation,” Gillard said. “These kids in the foster care system are the responsibility of the state as well, and the state has a responsibility to make sure the needs of these kids are being met to the best of their ability.”

Additional resources for CNS editors:

Monthly fact sheet provided by the DHS: Children in care by county as of January 31, 2015

Alcona – 32  
Alger – 9  
Allegan – 141  
Alpena – 52  
Antrim – 37  
Arenac – 53  
Baraga – 15  
Barry – 79  
Bay – 157  
Benzie – 10  
Berrien – 325  
Branch – 102  
Calhoun – 296  
Cass – 171  
Charlevoix – 35  
Cheboygan – 36  
Chippewa – 49  
Clare – 71  
Clinton – 46  
Crawford – 52  
Delta – 35  
Dickinson – 56  
Eaton – 107  
Emmet – 48  
Genesee – 534  
Gladwin – 31  
Gogebic – 24  
Grand Traverse – 68  
Gratiot – 42  
Hillsdale – 114  
Houghton – 11  
Huron – 40

Ingham – 620  
Ionia – 48  
Iosco – 53  
Iron – 6  
Isabella – 100  
Jackson – 277  
Kalamazoo – 722  
Kalkaska – 32  
Kent – 1130  
Lake – 56  
Lapeer – 65  
Leelanau – 15  
Lenawee – 108  
Livingston – 187  
Luce – 45  
Mackinac – 23  
Macomb – 648  
Manistee – 28  
Marquette – 62  
Mason – 65  
Mecosta – 75  
Menominee – 32  
Midland – 67  
Missaukee – 10  
Monroe – 172  
Montcalm – 56  
Montmorency – 15  
Muskegon – 407  
Newaygo – 120  
Oakland – 799  
Oceana – 33  
Ogemaw – 29  
Ontonagon – 4  
Osceola – 28  
Oscoda – 11  
Otsego – 48  
Ottawa – 195  
Presque Isle – 15  
Roscommon – 36  
Saginaw – 192  
St. Clair – 312  
St. Joseph – 128  
Sanilac – 67

Schoolcraft – 19  
Shiawassee – 82  
Tuscola – 93  
Van Buren – 145  
Washtenaw – 227  
Wayne– 2497  
Wexford – 59

Total: 13,141



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