

**Youth Voices Have Impact: When Teens in Foster Care Speak,
Action Follows**
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Public policy
in the best interest
of children.

When youth, especially those aging out of foster care, can engage in creating their own destinies, everyone wins, said Saba Gebrai, of Parks West Foundation's Blue Babies, a group dedicated to innovative and creative solutions for youth aging out of foster care in Michigan since 2006. For that reason, the program director says she was thrilled with an important outcome that emerged from a metro Detroit KidSpeak program in late January that brought together current and former foster kids with policymakers, including elected officials and staff and high-level decision-makers from the state and several local county offices of the Department of Human Services.

"At KidSpeak, our youth spoke very eloquently, and were able to connect with top level decision makers," Gebrai boasted. "As a result, right after KidSpeak some issues were resolved in a very expedient manner."

Among the issues youth raised was a chronic delay in government support for living expenses provided through a federally funded program for youths under age 21 who are living on their own. Youths who testified said the delays meant some weren't able to make their rent, became homeless, or defaulted in other financial obligations. Trying to resolve the matter individually sometimes took up to six months, she said.

After the recent KidSpeak engagement, some of the youth met directly with local DHS staff. "It was literally a working meeting in which we all worked together and made tremendous progress," Gebrai added. Currently, replies to the teens' dilemmas from local DHS workers are arriving by the next day.

"We have had the best, meaningful and respectful inclusion of youth in real policy transformation that is simply historic," Gebrai added. "I've never been able to say that before in my last nine years in child welfare."



The Park West Foundation has been dedicated to innovative and creative solutions for youth aging out of foster care in Michigan since 2006, where youth voice guides the foundation's priorities and youth group, the Blue Babies. <http://www.parkwestfoundation.org/blue-babies/blue-babies.html>