

Caregivers Advocate for More Training, Trauma Support before Legislative Listening Panel at FamilySpeak

LANSING, Sept. 23, 2015 -- Darrayl Pettway of East Lansing stood before a roomful of other parents from foster care, adoption and kinship care and described in painful detail the struggles he's endured trying to give his 15-year-old son, adopted from foster care, what he needs to succeed.

And he wasn't the only one who fought back tears as he recounted before a FamilySpeak listening panel of legislators and state agencies common experiences of parents testifying. Among them: The inability to access timely medical care, or mental health services to help address children dealing with trauma, as well as hefty out-of-pocket expenses for child care and other costs that have challenged family finances.

"They bring you this child with a sense of urgency but then when you need services urgently they are not there," said Pettway, who said he lost a good job at Michigan State University after missing too many work days tending to issues at home.

"We need to do more for these kids who have trauma issues and we need more support for the parents," he told a packed hearing room at the Michigan's Children-sponsored forum in the state Capitol. Other sponsoring groups included The Michigan Statewide, Foster, Adoptive and Kinship Family Coalition, The Michigan Federation for Children and Families, The Michigan Kinship Coalition, and The Kinship Care Resource Center.

President & CEO Matt Gillard said Michigan's Children is "absolutely committed" to working with legislative partners and other advocacy groups to move a legislative package forward that focuses on improving the child welfare system for the children, youth and caregivers involved. "A number of state Legislators are really interested in this issue, some with personal experiences in the system. We think there's real opportunity to make some meaningful changes," Gillard said.

The special FamilySpeak this week was designed to garner parent input to help reshape public policy in foster care. Pairing these findings with perspectives gained from numerous KidSpeak forums featuring the voices of young people served by and aging out of foster care also provides policymakers with a better look at how to help children and parents together, added Vice President for Programs Michele Corey.

"Kids have talked about being moved around all the time. And parents are saying there aren't enough services to help keep the children in their homes. Those stem from the same policy and investment decisions," she added.

State Rep. Jim Runestad, who helped bring the FamilySpeak to the Capitol, praised the families for speaking out and promised their efforts would not be in vain.

Besides supporting efforts to create a Foster Child Bill of Rights, Runestad said he would support the development of an ombudsman to help families better access the supports and services they're entitled to. Like many in the room, he also adopted a child after serving as her foster parent. "None of this is lost on deaf ears. We will be making improvements to the system," he said.

Other key state Legislators in attendance were state Reps. Thomas Hooker and Marcia Hovey-Wright, who along with Runestad have played important roles in building momentum for moving new foster care legislation. The three serve on the House Committee on Families, Children and Seniors. Additionally, the forum attracted the Governor's Human Services Advisor, staffers from five Congressional offices, a number of state Legislative offices and representatives of the state Departments of Health and Human Services and Education.

Parents and grandparents told of struggles accessing health care and other services, difficulty finding information about services, and failing to receive reimbursements for costs including transportation and child care. Most described the need for necessary early mental health and behavioral services for children removed from their biological families. Those who adopted children from foster care decried the withdrawal of still-needed health services after they left foster care. All said better support and training are needed to help families cope and navigate the child welfare, kinship care-giving and adoption systems.

Ruth Kanaga, a foster parent of 12 years, traveled from Iosco County in Northern Michigan to testify. When her daughter, now 11 and adopted, came to live with her at age 19 months with contusions and a black eye, the child was so traumatized she never slept more than two hours at a time. As she progressed in school, she frequently frightened teachers and school workers by running away, a "flight response" Kanaga said is not uncommon with children who have been traumatized.

Kanaga is now a "trauma trainer" who helps other families in foster care and says families and educators need to be better prepared when they are responsible for children from child welfare. "We have a system that's broken, especially when we go to adopt these children. Services are hard to find and we need to advocate for what they need. It changes your whole life."

Rachel Kornilakis from Ypsilanti, who is a foster and adoptive mom, has four children she calls "my life, my love. I'm here today because of those kids."

Kornilakis said most people who enter the child welfare system have no idea how complex it is nor how impacted by trauma children in it are. She offered recommendations that she said would make a difference:

- An automatic enrollment for funding for quality child care because most foster families spend their own money to provide quality care when they're working.
- Immediate mental health support. "They can't wait six months. This is a big problem. These families deserve that support."

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***The Michigan Statewide, Foster, Adoptive and Kinship Family Coalition** is a statewide collaborative of families and organizations that encourages parent led mutual support by informing, educating and advocating for foster, adoptive and kinship families.*

***The Michigan Federation for Children and Families** is a nonprofit membership association representing private nonprofit child welfare agencies throughout the state of Michigan. The mission of the Federation is to unite private, nonprofit human service providers, advocates, customers, individuals and funders to influence public policy in support of children, families and individuals' reaching their full potential; identify, develop and implement efficient and effective services to Michigan's most vulnerable children and families; and support and enhance the ability of Michigan's private, nonprofit agencies to provide human services.*

***The Michigan Kinship Coalition** is a group of caregivers and professional allies working with all kinship caregivers to inform and educate legislators; as well as work with organizations on kinship care issues to strengthen the kinship family unit, henceforth improving the lives of children.*

***The Kinship Care Resource Center (KCRC)** is a non-profit statewide organization through the School of Social Work at Michigan State University. The KCRC supports Michigan kinship families by utilizing research to provide education and outreach for communities, agencies, and individuals involved in supporting kinship families.*

***Michigan's Children** is the only statewide independent voice working to ensure that policymakers prioritize the needs of the most challenged children from cradle to career and their families – children of color, children from low-income families, and children shouldering other challenging circumstances. 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.*

***FamilySpeak**, modeled after Michigan's Children's signature KidSpeak® forums, mimics a traditional legislative committee hearing. These forums provide a rare opportunity for families to speak directly to a Listening Panel comprised of federal, state, county and city government representatives, as well as community and business leaders about barriers that they face to assist the children in their care. In addition, these families provide decision-makers with suggestions for change. Connecting the experiences of families directly with policymakers has provided firsthand knowledge of the challenges and opportunities and has proven to be an effective advocacy strategy. Their voices have changed the trajectory of policy conversation and have resulted in additional champions for parent-driven solutions in the Legislature, several Departments and other local policymaking bodies.*