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FamilySpeak: Raising the Voices of Caregivers from the Foster Care System

Tuesday, September 22, 2015

Speaker's Library, State Capitol

Michigan's Children, 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 were recently joined by nearly fifty local, state and federal decision makers at this FamilySpeak.

Eleven caregivers, including foster, adoptive and kinship parents, spoke to the listeners about what had brought them into the system, how their expectations differed from their reality of parenting, their specific challenges, and all made recommendations for changes in policies and programs to make the system work better for their families and others. Caregivers need:

- More training and support to be able to address the trauma that the children and youth they are caring for have experienced.
- Immediate, appropriate and sustained assessment of needs and access to a variety of services that the children and youth in their care require, including physical and mental health services, and developmental and educational supports.
- Immediate, appropriate and sustained access to services that help support them work as caregivers and breadwinners, including child care assistance beyond the age of 12, respite care, and employment supports that acknowledge additional time spent at school and with other service providers.
- Consistent connections between systems they are involved with, including child welfare, community health and community mental health, Early On, child care, special and regular education and the courts.
- More post-adoption services that continue beyond the age of 18.
- Better supports for kinship families, including those who have become parents outside the child welfare system.
- Consistent and meaningful engagement in policy setting through all systems that impact the children and youth they are caring for.

Momentum is building around the state, led by key members of the House of Representatives, to take another look at the foster care system that currently serves over 13,500 Michigan's children and supports their caregivers, including adoptive, foster, guardian and birth parents. In order to improve outcomes for children and youth, we need to support these caregivers. To do that effectively, we are hearing from young people and caregivers about their experiences, their successes and their recommendations for improvements in our current systems. So much of what young people experience as instability in their world and lack of services toward their eventual independence and adult success stems from exactly the same issues that caregivers articulate as lack of access to services and support so they can best care for their children. FamilySpeak partners will be working with policymakers to move forward recommendations in all of these areas through 2015 and beyond.

This FamilySpeak has been made possible by the voices of the families supported through the following partners:

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.

Families from Ingham, Iosco, Kent, Mason, Monroe, Oakland, Washtenaw, and Wayne counties were joined by the following listeners.

Elected Officials and Staff:

Senior Strategy Advisor, Office of the Governor

Staff, U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow

Staff, U.S. Representative Mike Bishop

Staff, U.S. Representative Sander Levin

Senate Fiscal Agency

Senate Majority Policy Office

Staff, State Representative Leslie Love

Staff, State Representative Adam Zemke

State Representative Jim Runestad

State Representative Marcia Hovey-Wright

State Representative Thomas Hooker

State Representative Tom Cochran

House Republican Policy Office

State Department Representatives:

Michigan Department of Education

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services

Other Advocacy Partners:

Adoptive Family Support Network
Alternatives for Girls
Association for Children's Mental Health
Early Childhood Investment Corporation
Family Enrichment Center
Foster Care Review Board
Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health
Michigan Association of United Ways
Michigan Federation for Children and Families
Michigan League for Public Policy
Michigan Protection & Advocacy Services, Inc.
Michigan Radio
Oakland Schools
Special Education Advocacy and Development (SEAD, MI)
State Farm Insurance Companies
WSU School of Social Work

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.

For more information about other opportunities to hear directly from young people or their families, please contact Michele Corey, Vice President for Programs, 517-977-0322 or michele@michiganschildren.org.