



## Youths Discuss Foster Care Struggles with Education, Employment and Health Care before WSU Listening Panel

*Aug. 8, 2016* -- Detroit-area youths with experience in the foster care system spoke expansively before a panel of policy-makers this month, identifying wide-ranging struggles and sharing the perspective that the child welfare systems needs significant attention before it works best for kids.

The KidSpeak program at Wayne State included a half dozen youth, including some who have aged out, with a listening audience of individuals from local and state elective offices, and representatives of the Departments of Health and Human Services and the State Board of Education. The program was arranged by Michigan's Children, a leader in public policy work for improvements to foster care, in partnership with Wayne State University's Transition to Independence Program (TIP), the Wayne State University School of Social Work, the Wayne State University Law School, the University of Michigan School of Social Work, and the Student Advisory Center of Michigan.

Participating youth, who shared insights into child welfare policies and practices from the consumer perspective, represented TIP, its Summer Youth Employment Program, and Covenant House, a nonprofit organization that serves at-risk, runaway and homeless youth in Detroit.

"The purpose of this KidSpeak is to give young people ages 16-24 who are aging out of the foster care system a voice in the public policy debate by giving them the opportunity to speak directly to federal, state and local decision makers about barriers that impede their successful transition from high school to college and employment," said Michigan's Children President & CEO Matt Gillard.

**Their remarks** were frequently painful to share and hear, particularly on topics such as their separation from siblings, the lack of access to and knowledge of mental health services, the disruptive changes in social workers assigned to their care, and troubles with placements.

They said that family visits should be mandatory for siblings in the system and that placement with family members should be a priority. One youth told of her separation from a younger sibling for five years, even though it was promised that they would stay in contact. And another said he had not seen his twin brother throughout his foster care experience.

Frequent moves from one placement to another, and from one school district to another, are particularly vexing, they said. Moving away from supportive networks leaves them to rely exclusively on foster families and state Department of Health and Human Services workers.

A Wayne State University professor told of one case in which a youth did not have money for housing or food for nearly a year when she did not have an assigned case worker.

Others described poor communication around the re-assignment of social workers assigned to their care. One youth said she didn't learn her case worker was off the job for a month; some said they were left unaware for months.

A coordinator, Arikah Buford, said problems that arise are often attributed to the fact that case workers are overloaded.

In addition to the stresses and frustrations of life in the system, the youth expressed worries about gaining access to mental health services, questions over diagnoses, and the need for better information about counseling opportunities.

**More information** is also needed in areas such as education and mentorship programs for future careers. Youths said they need better information for financial help for college and for becoming independent after college. "Some of us get out and don't even know how to pay rent or apply for a job," said one youth. "How are we going to survive on our own once we age out?"

Young adults leaving foster care are strained to get on their feet. Many face unemployment, lack basic needs such as food and housing, and don't pursue post-secondary education because they're unfamiliar with prospects for them. Homelessness and incarceration are not unusual outcomes in many cases, they said.

Said one youth: "Foster kids don't know they can have a normal life, too."

Another reasoned that if the system better provided for children in the welfare system fewer social safety net supports would be needed once they reached adulthood.

*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 – children of color, children from low-income families, and children shouldering other challenging circumstances. We have been creating opportunities for young people to share their stories, concerns and suggestions directly with policymakers since 1996.*

***KidSpeak** is a rare opportunity for decision makers to hear youth directly share their experiences with the child welfare system and foster care; the education system, including alternative paths to diploma; and homelessness, safety and violence. Their voices have changed the trajectory of policy conversation and have resulted in additional champions for youth-driven solutions in the Legislature, several Departments and other local policymaking bodies.*



*The **Wayne State University Transition to Independence Program (TIP Wayne State)** exists to increase college access and improve the graduation rates of foster care youth in Southeast Michigan. TIP provides foster care alumni who attend Wayne State University with wraparound services and support, including financial assistance, peer and career mentoring, legal aid, life skills workshops, individual therapy, fresh produce, food pantry items, care package and much more. TIP Wayne State is housed in the School of Social Work at Wayne State University.*

***Wayne State University Law School** strives to be the premier public interest law school in the Midwest. They train the next generation of lawyers, advocates and leaders. Their civil rights, entrepreneurship, environmental and international programs, and their related clinics, set Wayne Law apart as a community of advocates for justice committed to serving the public.*

*The **Student Advocacy Center of Michigan** is a unique organization with a proud, 40-year history of helping vulnerable students stay in school or get back into school. Their services include youth-driven, family-driven, collaborative education advocacy and support, as well as a statewide Student Rights Hotline, an evidence-based academic mentoring program that lasts at least two years, and a leadership after-school program called Youth Action Michigan, which gives students most impacted by school pushout, the skills, connections and supports they need to spark systems changes. They are particularly focused on students experiencing foster care, “homelessness, mental illness and the negative impacts of harsh school discipline.*

*The **University of Michigan’s School of Social Work** is ranked #1 school of Social Work in the U.S and offers interdisciplinary MSW and PhD degrees, field instruction (internships), an undergraduate minor and life-long learning opportunities. For more than 90 years, they have led the profession in teaching, research, innovation, collaboration and service. The University of Michigan School of Social Work is poised to take on new challenges in the next decade and we invite you join us in reaching out, raising hope, and changing society. **Reach Out. Raise Hope. Change Society.***



State Farm supports Michigan’s Children and WSU KidSpeak ® 2016 because they believe that all children deserve and education that will help them reach their greatest potential and prepare them for life.