



Dorene's Story: Need for More Timely Mental Health Services

Dorene Jones is frustrated by the length of time it takes to get essential mental health services for children in the foster care system in Michigan.

She has had four different children placed in her home since 2013, and despite the fact that each had moderate to severe emotional issues, it sometimes took more than a month to get services. It's a story she wants to share with others.

The Washtenaw County resident is scheduled to be one of the caregivers — including foster, adoptive and kinship parents — to speak before lawmakers, staff and others at the state Capitol on Feb. 28 during a FamilySpeak event designed to give voice to their struggles with the system and to make recommendations for changes in policies and programs. The event is being hosted by Lansing-based Michigan's Children, the only statewide independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children and their families.

In 2014, it took five weeks for Jones to get therapy for the 10-year-old girl who had been placed in her home, despite having a current Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale score.

"The worst part about this situation is that it wasn't an immediate placement," she said. "We were visiting with her (for) three or four weeks before she was placed. We tried to set up mental health care so that when she was with us full time everything would be ready to go. But we were told that nothing could be done until she was actually placed with us."

She cited the County Financial Agreement (COFOR) between counties as the biggest roadblock for getting adequate assistance. In her particular case, the agreements were between Wayne and Washtenaw counties. Children moving between counties as they move placements is not uncommon

She struggled to get insurance coverage for trauma therapy for another young girl placed in her care who had "significant behavior issues." She said that because of an issue over Medicaid and Community Mental Health, she was forced to use her own insurance for the girl's therapy, which covered just 20 visits a year, not nearly enough for this child.

"She needs two-plus days of therapy a week. Once the 20 visits were done, we paid out of pocket until (Community Mental Health) therapy began. We didn't want to have a lapse in therapy."

She applied for funds through the Severe Emotional Disturbance (SED) Waiver to get more mental health services for her now-adopted daughter. "We were told that she could get therapy while we

waited for approval. However, Washtenaw County told us that we could not (get her therapy) until it was approved. Again, this went back to the COFOR agreement between Wayne and Washtenaw. We have found repeatedly that counties don't want to be responsible for paying for services. It took (five) months before it was approved and we could get mental health services for her through CMH.

"Most children in foster care have had trauma; many have had severe trauma. Even a week or two without therapy can be detrimental. But when it's many weeks or even months, the result can be the dissolution of the placement and/or the child ending up in psychiatric care.

"It is imperative that these children get the mental health services they need immediately!"

Dorene Jones is being supported at this FamilySpeak through our partner:

Fostering Forward Michigan (FFM) is a dynamic, statewide coalition of foster, adoptive and kinship families who actively engaged and provide direct support and service on a daily basis. The FFM community works to find solutions to the common and prevalent problems facing our families and actively advocates on behalf of our families on issues such as payments, services, permanency and equity.

Michigan's Children's emphasis is on influencing public policies that close equity gaps and ensure that the children and youth who face the most challenges have the supports they need to succeed in school and life. By working to reform public policy, we improve the odds for all children, and support the work of those who provide services that help individual children overcome the odds. 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 composed 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.