

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

Tuesday, February 28, 2017

Speaker's Library, State Capitol

Michigan's Children and our recruitment partners, the Adoptive Family Support Network, Families on the Move, the Family Enrichment Center, Fostering Forward, the Kinship Care Resource Center, and the Michigan Statewide, Foster, Adoptive and Kinship Family Coalition were joined by nearly thirty federal and state policymakers at our 2nd FamilySpeak focused on caregivers in the child welfare system. State Representatives Runestad and Kosowski co-hosted the event.

Eighteen caregivers – kin, foster and adoptive parents – spoke to the listeners about their motivation, generosity and joy that brought them to children needing extraordinary care and their challenges and sometimes heartbreak when they were not adequately supported in doing so. In describing the challenges faced, they made recommendations for changes in policies and programs to make the system work better for their families and others.

Caregivers had their own individual stories, but all of the speakers reflected concerns in the following areas:

1. **Remove Cross-County Barriers to Services:** Several speakers the problem with cross-county placements and an inability to get needed services in a timely way because of differences of opinion of which county would be responsible for service payment, particularly for behavioral health services. The delays in services for one family resulted in a failed adoptive placement.
2. **Improve access to Early, Timely Services:** Several speakers again raised issues of the need for early intervention services, including appropriate assessment and treatment options for developmental and other delays. In addition, access to child care services through the state's inadequate payment system was seen as an obstacle for families with young children and children that were school-age.
3. **Embed Early and Continued Support for Caregivers:** Families asked for more training and information before children and youth entered their care, high quality respite opportunities and parent-to-parent support groups for kin, foster and adoptive parents. They all talked about the financial burden to their families related to un-reimbursed expenses, including mental health services, child care services, educational services and other core needs of the children and youth in their care.
4. **Facilitate Better Coordination With the Courts:** Several speakers talked about ways that they felt the legal guardian ad litem (LGAL) system failed to protect children in their care. Families talked about LGALs allowing children to live in unsafe placements, and foster children being removed based on the LGAL recommendation despite support from relatives and the Department of Health and Human Services. Recommendations of families are consistent with those of the Foster Care Review Boards in Michigan that LGALs need to have improved training and oversight, as well as better pay.

In order to improve outcomes for children and youth, we need to better support these caregivers. This conversation is timely. As evidenced by increased momentum through the legislature and several components of the Governor's recent budget proposal, there is broad understanding that more needs to be done. To support caregivers effectively, we need to hear from them directly about their experiences, their successes and their recommendations for improvements in our current systems. And, we need to use what we learn to build better policy and practice.

Families were joined by the following listeners:

Elected Officials and Staff:

Staff, Congressman Dan Kildee
State Representative Sherry Gay-Dagnogo
State Representative Bronna Kahle
State Representative Robert Kosowski
State Representative Jim Runestad
House Democratic Policy Office
House Republican Policy Office

State Department Representatives:

Michigan Department of Education
Michigan Department of Health and Human Services

Other Advocacy Partners:

Capitol Services, Inc.
Center for Fostering Success
Junior Leagues of Michigan
Kandler, Reed, Khoury and Muchmore
Michigan Association of United Ways
Michigan Children's Trust Fund
Michigan Court Appointed Special Advocates
Michigan Federation for Children and Families
Western Michigan University, School of Social Work

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

The Adoptive Family Support Network (AFSN) serves as a clearinghouse for information useful to adoptive parents, a source of support to families facing adoption issues, and to advocate for families and for change in policy and practices that affect adoptive families. AFSN works closely with area adoption agencies and provides adoptive families links to the experts and each other.

Families on the Move, Inc. (FOTM) serves as a voice for Foster, Adoptive, Kinship and biological families statewide through advocacy, support services and reform to garner family support and stability. FOTM serves families through monthly parent support meetings, youth centered programs and individual assistance with system meetings and processes.

The Family Enrichment Center (FEC) is a non-profit organization serving Calhoun County. The FEC exists to fill the gaps of the child welfare system by providing training, support, mentoring and services to all families, with an emphasis on adoptive, foster and kinship families.

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.

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.

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 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.

Michigan's Children Michigan's Children is the only statewide independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children from cradle to career and their families. Our 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 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 this FamilySpeak or other opportunities to hear directly from young people or their families, please contact Michele Corey, Vice President for Programs, at 517-648-5498 or michele@michiganschildren.org.