

## Foster Care Awareness Month

### Spotlight on The Needs of Caregivers: Powerful Voices and Partners

*May is Foster Care Awareness Month, giving an opportunity to highlight the impact of current policy decisions and the lives of young people and caregivers who have lived within the foster care system in Michigan. Michigan's Children thanks Julie Schnell, Foster and Adoptive parent and leader in the Junior League's Statewide Public Affairs Committee, for sharing her story of turning frustration into action to make things better for children across Michigan.*



“My name is Julie Schnell, and I am a speech therapist, occupational therapist, and mental health worker, among other things” Schnell introduced herself to a room of legislators and other advocates. “Or, to put it more simply, I am a foster parent.”

Schnell, of Saginaw, had never considered herself much of a “political person.” Then, she started fostering.

“My (now adopted) daughter had developmental delays, and it was very difficult to access services for her,” Schnell recalls. “I kept fighting to break down the barriers and quickly realized that many of the issues were with the system itself.”

That is when she decided to take action to improve the system for her foster children and others. A member of the [Junior League of the Great Lakes Bay Region](#), Schnell joined the [Junior League's Statewide Public Affairs Committee \(SPAC\)](#), an advocacy arm of the Michigan Junior Leagues, which are organizations of women committed to voluntarism, developing the potential of women, and improving communities through the effective action and leadership of trained volunteers. The committee had seen success in its advocacy on issues related to supporting victims of human trafficking, Schnell soon became an officer of the committee, and, when the time came for the committee to choose a new advocacy area to add to its human trafficking focus, she made the case for foster care as a new area. The committee was persuaded, and, as SPAC Chairwoman over the past two years, Schnell has led the development of a foster care advocacy platform.

When asked about her top legislative priority, Schnell says that, first and foremost, she would like to see reintroduced and passed the Children's Assurance of Quality Foster Care Act, a piece of legislation which

after passing through the Michigan House almost unanimously, failed to make it through the Michigan Senate during its lame duck session in 2016.

“When I first learned about this bill,” Schnell recalls, “I felt like it wasn’t enough. I wanted more, because there is so much work to be done. Then, in talking with legislators, other advocates, and foster care workers, I realized that this would be a major step forward in signaling the commitment of the Michigan legislature to doing what is right on behalf of foster kids. This would absolutely make it easier for me to successfully do my job as a foster parent and ensure access to the necessary services for my children.”

Improving timely access to mental and behavioral health services for children in foster care is another top policy priority for Schnell.

“Being removed from a parent’s home for any reason is traumatic for a child,” she says, “and it is critical that the trauma is addressed quickly and effectively.”

Schnell says that an optional trauma training session she went through was the most beneficial training she has received as a foster parent, because it provided her with essential information and strategies for assisting her children to overcome their trauma.

“It was very difficult to access *Early On* services for my daughter,” Schnell remembers, “but, once we were able to get them for her, we began seeing progress.” *Early On* provides early intervention services to families with children birth to age three who have developmental delays or diagnosed health conditions that could lead to such delays. The lack of *Early On* services for all infants and toddlers who could benefit from them is due to a lack of adequate, consistent and statewide funding for both outreach to families and program services, which is why *Early On* continues to be one of Michigan’s Children’s priorities, including recent a recent [brief on the inequity in services](#) leading up to a more comprehensive budget ask beginning this fall.

Schnell would like to see trauma-informed parenting incorporated into the initial, required foster parent training and stresses her belief that it would improve foster parent retention. She decided to go through the training out of desperation after her daughter continued exhibiting alarming behaviors. The training provided her with strategies to help her best serve both her adopted and foster children.

“Being a foster parent is the most rewarding and thankless job there is,” Schnell says, “but as soon as you see even a slight improvement in a child’s well being, you’re reminded that every single challenging moment is worthwhile.”

**Keep current on activity in this legislation session for foster care, including in state and federal budget going on now on Michigan’s Children’s [web site](#). [Sign up for our bi-monthly e-bulletins](#) and [keep track of us on Facebook](#) to make sure you don’t miss opportunities for action. If you’d like to share your story as part of our Spotlight series, contact Michele Corey, [michele@michiganschildren.org](mailto:michele@michiganschildren.org).**