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Foster Care Matters

Use this Election Season to Make Good On Our Promise to Children, Youth and Families

There are over 13,000 children and youth experiencing foster care in Michigan who, by the nature of their circumstances, face challenges to their success. Despite some improvements, there are still predictably poor outcomes for children, youth and families who have been involved in the foster care system. They are more likely to experience a host of negative outcomes, and struggle with their eventual school and life success.

Nearly half of all children and youth in foster care have had four or more [adverse experiences](#), which expose young people to toxic stress and prompts the prolonged release of hormones that delay cognitive development. Without the care of supportive adults and services, children and youth with these experiences are more likely than others to: have a developmental delay or neurological impairment; exhibit behavioral and emotional problems; lack school engagement and be suspended or expelled from school; or have a limiting physical, learning, or mental health condition. According to national surveys, youth who age out of care (instead of returning home or being adopted), face significant challenges including failure to graduate high school, substance misuse, emotional problems and more experiences of unemployment, homelessness, and incarceration, early pregnancy and chronic health conditions than other youth. These [outcomes](#) are particularly grim for those who spend long periods of time in multiple placements over their time in care.

There are clear imperatives to better serve this population, to keep them with their families and out of foster care when we can, and to better serve children and youth who must be removed from damaging situations. Investing in practices that address family challenges before children and youth enter the child welfare and foster care systems is paramount, including domestic violence, substance use/misuse, mental health challenges, lack of parental knowledge and skill, lack of connection to supports, and lack of resources for basic needs or the skills to get them. Improving access to supports that stabilize work and school for families, like child care and transportation and improving access to services that keep young people moving on positive paths before they become parents like mental health, substance use and targeted educational support are all critical.

Years of research and listening to lived experience also points to what kids need once they have been placed in foster care, including supportive caregivers trained in trauma and supported themselves; connections to birth families and preference of family placements; consistent placements, normal environments and timely services to address more complex needs; and other systems that work closely with child welfare to meet their needs – child care, health, education, workforce. Caregivers of all types in the system, including birth, foster and adoptive parents, kin and other guardians, group homes and other institutional living arrangements, are struggling to provide what is needed for the children and youth in their care. In addition to ensuring that timely assessment of health, mental health, child care,

educational and other needs and accessible services to address those needs, they require consistent training and support.

And once young people have been a part of the system, we need to better prepare them for life success. Maintaining support through young adulthood is even more critical for young people who have spent time in care, and services should be available regardless of age, or geography, with access based instead on skill building and successful outcomes. Educational resources need to be better targeted toward identification, assessment and services for students in care, and for initiatives that help students catch up and inspire success.

What is the Role of Policymakers?

Because of the public's unique role – the state has made decisions about their families, about where they live and about who is responsible for their care – we hold unique responsibility for their well-being and our child welfare system needs to be held to a higher standard of success for the children, youth and families in our care, particularly for those whom we have removed from their homes. Unfortunately, by eliminating virtually all of the state funding beyond what is required for federal match, and by under-resourcing supportive services for children and families outside of the child welfare system as well, Michigan has created a system for our most vulnerable children, youth and families that does not result in the outcomes that we need.

Lawmakers play many roles in supporting policy and investments that keep families out of the foster care system, better serve children, youth and their caregivers in foster care, and better prepare young people for life success. Both federal and state lawmakers can influence the future of public policy and investment for improving outcomes for these vulnerable children, youth and families in Michigan. This over-reliance on federal resources makes it critically important that our federal policymakers – U.S. Senators and Congresspeople – make the best decisions possible about policy and investments for this population. Equally important is for state-level policymakers to take seriously their responsibility for children and youth in their care, and commit to improving their outcomes.

Suggested Questions for Candidates

- How would you prioritize supporting families so that they can avoid entering the child welfare and foster care systems?
- If children need to be temporarily removed from their parents, how would you maintain family bonds with birth parents, siblings and relatives?
- How would you ensure that caregivers in the foster care system were provided adequate training and resources?
- How would you ensure that children and youth in care had timely and consistent access to physical and mental health and developmental assessment and services?
- How would you ensure that young people exiting foster care had the tools that they need for educational and life success?