



KidSpeak®: Foster Care Matters

Monday, August 13, 2018

Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights, Wayne State University

Michigan's Children and our partner, Wayne State Champions Aspiring to Make Pathways to Success (CHAMPS), were joined by a panel of federal, state, and local officials at our 5th co-hosted KidSpeak® on the many experiences of young adults who have transitioned out of the foster care system. Seven young adult speakers testified to the listening panel about their experiences in the foster care system, noting effective s and highlighting barriers to stability and success. The youth made recommendations to strengthen the foster care system for youth involved of all ages. Connecting the unique stories and experiences of the young people were some broad themes for needed reform:

- 1. Expand access to benefits and ensure benefit continuity:** Several youth speakers showed how the Fostering Futures and Education Training Voucher scholarships were instrumental to getting them through school, but that they still lacked resources to secure rent and car insurance. Another speaker explained how the cut-off eligibility age of 13 for these scholarships prevented them from accessing benefits that would have prevented other crises in their life.
- 2. Dramatically expand access to high-quality mental health care:** The speakers also stressed the importance of having consistent, high-quality mental health care. Many youth in foster care experience misdiagnosis and over-prescription, citing the shortage of high-quality mental health workers and discontinuous care from regularly seeing a new physician, which also requires youth to repeatedly retell and relive stories of trauma to catch a new physician up.
- 3. Improve the consistency and quality of Legal Guardian Ad Litem (LGALs):** The youth speakers and listening panel also discussed the quality of representation from LGALs, court-appointed attorneys who are tasked with representing the best interests of the child. Because LGAL recruitment and training are predominately determined by local courts, the quality of LGAL representation varies significantly and jeopardizes the representation of youth's best interests.
- 4. Ensure consistent support immediately upon entry:** Speakers highlighted the value of having consistent support from the beginning of their affiliation with the child welfare system, not only in mental health and other essential care but also having consistent mentorship and emotional support. Children act out during the early days of their time in foster care because they do not feel secure, and consistent support and mentorship can alleviate those feelings of insecurity.

In order to improve youth outcomes, we must not only prevent traumatic experiences and strengthen families wherever possible, we must ensure that any children and youth who enter the system experience uninterrupted care and support until they may be reunited with their families, adopted, or until they transition into adult life. To learn where the gaps in the system are and how these gaps affect children and youth in foster care, we must listen and learn directly from their experiences and uplift youth as experts and vital stakeholders in the effort to create a stronger foster care system.

Youth were joined by the following listeners:

Elected Officials and Staff:

Sander Levin, US Congressperson
Stephanie Chang, State Representative
Raquel Castañeda-López, Detroit City Council

State and Local Government Representatives:

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services
Michigan Interagency Council on Homelessness
Michigan Office of the Foundation Liaison
Oakland County Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative

Other Partners:

Blue Cross, Blue Shield of Detroit
CARE House of Oakland County
Focus Hope
Justice Maura D. Corrigan
Rochester Community Schools
State Bar of Michigan Children's Law Section
Student Advocacy Center
The Children's Center Detroit
The New Foster Care
Vista Maria

This KidSpeak® was made possible by the voices of the youth, and supported through the efforts of:

Wayne State Champions Aspiring to Make Pathways to Success (CHAMPS) exists to increase college access and improve the graduation rates of youth with foster care (after age 13) and juvenile justice history in Southeast Michigan by providing trauma-informed wrap-around services, including coaching, academic services, case management, and emergency funds.

Kidspeak® is a youth public forum that empowers young people to advocate on their own behalf. Operating on a statewide and local basis, Kidspeak brings youth before listening panels comprised of legislators, other public officials, and community leaders to talk about issues of concern to them. Kidspeak forums provide young people with authentic civic engagement experience and to provide policymakers the rare opportunity to hear the voices of young people. Given the opportunity, in ways both poignant and powerful, youths can change the way adults make decisions. Michigan's Children, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, presents Kidspeak as a non-partisan activity. Kidspeak is a registered trademark of Michigan's Children.

To learn about this KidSpeak® or other opportunities to hear directly from young people or families, contact Michele Corey, Vice President for Programs, at 517-648-5498 or michele@michiganschildren.org