



Date: May 15, 2019
To: House Families, Children, and Seniors Committee
From: Matt Gillard, President & CEO
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RE: HB 4406 and Supporting Young People Experiencing Foster Care in Post-Secondary Education

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 4406. Michigan's Children is the only statewide and independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children, youth and families, with a focus on proven plays that improve equitable outcomes for children. The state has a unique responsibility for children and families in foster care, and upholding that responsibility will result in better education and life success for young people who have experienced care. We have been committed to bringing the voices of young people and caregivers in the foster care system into policy conversations.

We have been long-time supporters of the Fostering Futures Scholarship and are supportive of efforts to expand its reach and impact, like HB4406, as long as appropriate financial and other resources are devoted to those efforts:

- **Tuition Assistance is Important, but Not The Whole Story.**

Michigan institutions of higher education have led the nation in college support programs, and we have learned a lot from that experience about what works to engage young people experiencing foster care in post-secondary options and what keeps them there and successful. While we understand the importance of access to financial resources, we also understand the importance of access to other supports, including those provided on-site through coaches, mentors and connections to other needed services. Young people drop out of school or training because of a variety of circumstances, personal or otherwise, leaving them with a record of poor performance. As we are thinking about expanding the reach of scholarships, we need to also think about how students in these situations will be supported.

- **Expanding the Reach of the Scholarship Without Expanding Resources Available to Support It is Counterproductive.**

Its current funding source, TANF, lends restrictions to the use of these scholarships by students, who often have complicated needs and associated costs when transitioning to college. With a different funding source, it could more flexibly layer onto other tuition assistance programs and could be expanded to address more needs of the young people receiving it. Any expansion of eligibility to serve more students must be coupled with additional resources. Private donations have not been consistent and make up a small share of the total funding available while public funding has been flat, so including additional young people in the program would only decrease the amount available with each scholarship.

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- **Thoughtful Expansion With Resources Should Include Part-Time Options, Apprenticeships and Entrepreneurial Skill Building.**

In addition to limits in the institutions able to receive the scholarship funds, many young people are not able to receive the scholarship because they are not able to maintain a full-time class schedule. Young people who have experienced care may be coping with trauma stemming from previous instability, and are at higher risk for diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health needs or learning challenges. This results in the need to lessen class loads at different times through their post-secondary careers, and the vast majority of them must work in addition to any training. Part-time scholarship options would encourage young people to remain on a degree path. In addition to trade school options, many young people in care could benefit from registered apprenticeships or skill building and support for entrepreneurial efforts.

- **Exploring Gaps in Post-Secondary Supports for This Population Is Important.**

There are several other resources available to young people experiencing foster care as adolescents, including federal Pell Grants, TIP (the Tuition Incentives Program based on Medicaid receipt), and ETV (Education and Training Vouchers.) This Committee could recommend a comprehensive look at financial and other resources available for young people currently and formerly in care, and assess gaps in those resources. Young people involved with existing youth engagement efforts through the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI); the National Foster Youth Institute, MI Chapter; and Fostering Success through The New Foster Care could serve as sources of information for this kind of assessment. The Committee could also engage more disconnected youth through networks of agencies serving homeless youth, youth involved in the juvenile justice system and youth with mental health or substance use disorders and youth who have dropped out of high school.

- **Supporting the Population in K-12 is Also Important**

With new data from the Department of Education available indicating that fewer than half of the young people in care are graduating high school within four years, the share of students who can even begin a post-secondary path is not what it should be. In addition, while more young people are applying for the Fostering Futures Scholarship, a significant group (nearly one fifth of all applications) don't end up attending college and utilizing it. More attention paid to the population of applicants through the summer after graduation would help with that retention. While education policy is not necessarily the purview of this committee, policy impacting the success of young people in care certainly is.

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions. We look forward to continuing to work with you to improve the success of our children, youth, families, and our state, especially those who are experiencing foster care, leaving care or are at risk of entering the foster care system.