

May 2019

Preserving Stability and Relationships for Children and Youth in Foster Care

Too many families face barriers to stability including poor mental health, substance misuse, violence, inadequate parenting skills and responses reflecting the traumas that they faced as children. When we decide to separate families, we bear the responsibility to definitively say that children and youth, and often their families and caregivers, are doing better with system attention than they would be otherwise, regardless of where they are born or currently living.

Relative Caregivers

Many children and youth in Michigan are being raised by grandparents and other relatives when their own parents are unwilling or unable to care for them. There is ample evidence that relative care works best for many children and youth, which is why child welfare systems have stated priorities that include placing children with suitable relatives when possible. In Michigan, over 4,000 children live with a relative who is a licensed foster parent, and according to Generations United, it is estimated that more than ten times that many children outside the foster care system live with a grandparent or other relative.

Family Preservation and Reunification Programs

Most children involved with the foster care system are on a path to be reunified with their parents. Youth in foster care experience better outcomes when they maintain connections with their birth families, especially if there is an intention to reunify. However, birth families are often unable to access the support or services they need while their kids are in foster care.

Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs)

CASA is a nationwide network of citizen volunteers trained to advocate on behalf of abused and neglected children in family courts. These advocates serve as the voice for children who cannot speak for themselves, helping judges, foster care organizations, and other parties make sound decisions regarding a child's future.

Most of the recommendations from the Governor and both chambers are continuation funding from the current year, with a few exceptions. With opportunities to access additional federal resources, and other mandates for increased services, this year's budget is an important tool to improve the child welfare system for children, youth and families.

CURRENT SITUATION: The Governor and the Senate have finalized their budget recommendations in these areas. The House Appropriations Committee will soon vote on their own. The full House will then vote to approve their budget, and then both chambers will go to a Conference Committee to iron out differences. Even though major changes don't typically happen once all sides have weighed in, citizen voices need to be heard throughout the budget process. Informing elected officials about how best to prioritize spending our tax dollars must be a year-round endeavor.

Recommendations

1. **Support funding incentive payments to relative caregivers who become licensed foster parents.** The House included \$1 million and the Senate included \$500K after the Governor recommended \$1.8 million to support new, one-time incentive payments of \$1,000 for relative caregivers who become licensed as foster parents within 180 days of a relative child's initial placement. We support these incentive payments for relatives who are interested in becoming licensed, and the need to continue to ensure financial resources to other relative caregivers who may face obstacles to becoming licensed.
2. **Support the House recommended \$5.9 million increase to expand the Foster Care Supportive Visitation program and new Parent-Child Visit Assistance services.** Both of these programs assist in reunification for families in foster care. The Senate reduced the increase to \$1 million.
3. **Support investment in the Parent Partner program.** While the Governor had recommended an increase for this program that provides in-home mentoring and other supports to help birth parents succeed with reunification with their children, both the House and Senate included flat funding for this program, but the Senate included a \$100 placeholder to continue discussion in Conference Committee.
4. **Support investments in Court-Special Advocates (CASA).** While the Governor, the House and the Senate failed to propose funding for the CASA program, the Senate did include a \$100 placeholder to ensure that the discussion could continue in budget Conference Committee. Michigan's Children is asking for state investment to allow all children and youth in the court system access to a well-trained and supported Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). \$500,000 in this year's budget with a total of \$1.5 million over three years could begin that state expansion by ensuring access in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties.