

NFYI Presents Michele Corey with First-Ever National 'Fostering Exemplary Change Award'

For her fierce advocacy in raising up the voices of youth from foster care over two decades, **Michigan's Children Vice President for Programs Michele Corey** has received the **Fostering Exemplary Change Award** from the national alumni group, the National Foster Youth Initiative (NFYI).

Corey, a 20-year veteran of Michigan's Children responsible for developing the nonprofit's strategy for policy initiatives for improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children and youth in Michigan, is the national award's first recipient. It was presented by Angelica Cox, founder of NFYI's Michigan chapter and herself an alumna of foster care, at NFYI's Michigan Legislative Shadow Day at the Capitol.

"Michele has worked tirelessly to find allies and build champions for key initiatives for foster youth such as the Michigan's Fostering Futures Scholarship, the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative, and the Quality Assurance of Quality and Foster Care Act," Cox said. "She has created countless opportunities for youth in the child welfare system to share their experiences and to define their own issues and solutions with policymakers. She's consistently demonstrated to colleagues and public officials how important it is to prioritize young people in foster care."



"She's been a fierce advocate, very inspiring, empowering and such a genuine person," Cox said.

Corey, a Michigan State University graduate, led organizational efforts at Michigan's Children to push for adoption of the [Quality Assurance and Foster Care Act](#) for three legislative sessions before it was adopted into law during the 2018 lame duck session. The act ensures that youth in care are treated fairly when placements are made, that they have access to medical treatment for their emotional and psychological health, that they are enrolled in school in a timely manner, and that they are placed with relatives and siblings when appropriate, among other provisions. She has also been a strong proponent for increasing state support for youth aging out of care which typically occurs at 18, though the vast majority neither have the resources nor the family support to launch self-reliant lives. An initiative she has been outspoken about recently is the need to significantly boost the state's \$750,000 annual investment in college scholarships for youth aging out of foster care. She has been instrumental in not only bringing youth from foster care before decision-makers but also foster parents and service providers.

"Michele's leadership and passion for this work, and her effectiveness in addressing legislators and policymakers from both political persuasions, has made a real difference in the state's handling of children in care and most importantly in the lives of thousands of young people who have gone into the child welfare system through no fault of their own," said Michigan's Children President and CEO Matt Gillard. "Michigan's Children has been a forerunner in thinking about how to develop real opportunities for bringing people who are impacted by public policy together with those making decisions on their

behalf through our KidSpeak, FamilySpeak and youth-led candidate forums in election years. We wouldn't be where we are today if not for Michele Corey."

Stacy Bladen, the Deputy Director of the Children's Services Agency at the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, credited Corey for building momentum for change and improvements in the state's child welfare system by introducing people with lived experiences to decision-makers. In addition to her work on the Quality Foster Care bill, she praised her advocacy for the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI), a program created for youths 14-23 to provide assistance in areas of housing, employment education, and mental health. "Her support for MYOI has helped countless older youth finish educational goals and gain essential living skills for lifelong success," Bladen said.

Each year approximately 7,400 children enter foster care for the first time in Michigan with an estimated 13,000 children being cared for through the foster care system in families, independent living or residential placement in any given year. Annually, nearly 800 youths age out of foster care without a permanent family, often with no place to live, a sustaining job, or a supportive network to help navigate life's complexities. Nearly half of Michigan's 13,000 children in foster care have been exposed to toxic stress.

When the state removes children from their families of origin because of circumstances related to abuse or neglect, it is incumbent on Michigan to ensure that these children and young people have the resources they need to grow up healthy and able to care for themselves, Corey said. "When they become wards of the state, it is the state that is responsible for their outcomes."

Corey praised members of the National Foster Youth Initiative for their advocacy, and in particular Angelica Cox, who received NFYI's Champion of Children and Families award. NFYI's Michigan Leadership Corps was recognized as a leader among state chapters. "I'm really honored that an organization that is made up of youth from foster care has honored me. This is hugely humbling for me," Corey said.

Besides her work at Michigan's Children, Corey is a member of the Michigan Foster Care Review Board, an advisory committee through the State Court Administrator's Office, and has served with the State Policy Action Reform Center related to child welfare issues. Corey said she is grateful for recent national attention on the state of children in and from foster care. In Michigan, only 40 percent of youth from foster care graduate high school on time. She said it's time for serious improvement. "We do significantly worse with foster kids than any other group. Look at the educational data. Look at the health data. They're a uniquely disadvantaged group. They are not just poor; they have so many documented needs including mental health needs because of the trauma in their past. All of this leads to instability," she said.

Corey said the state could help by investing in foster care, which today relies solely on federal dollars. Other areas need change, too, including helping families stay together, she said. "We're still not accessing kinship and relative care in a way that makes any sense. We need to take advantage of that."