

In State's Continuing Budget Negotiations, Forget the Road Rage. Let's Fix the Holes in Child Welfare.

Summer temps are finally rising in Michigan and the state Capitol is getting hotter while Governor Whitmer and Legislative leaders trade barbs and accelerate opposing arguments for carving out spending within the state's \$60 billion budget to "fix the damn roads." The showdown over the budget is upon us with the Governor's sights set on a problematic .45-cent per gallon regressive gas tax increase that would hurt families of low income the most – and Republican lawmakers posturing they'll put the brakes on any tax hike – even publicly entertaining such goofy notions as borrowing from employee pension funds or selling public bridges to fix crumbling roads. So much attention is being paid to disputed budget negotiations these days – and please understand, we like safe, drivable roads, too – that one would believe it was Michigan's solo, not just number one, budget priority.

But as child and family advocates, we know better, right? Switch gears with me for a minute and consider the human cost of failing to invest in the children of Michigan as we've tragically let happen for far too long. Pock-marked roads are uncomfortable but we've got huge holes in our child welfare system - our most critical issue in Michigan - and we must demand to turn up the talk on this. If we allow the FY2020 budget deliberations to continue without a hard look at increasing investment in our state's children and families, we'll be doing a serious disservice to them, ourselves and our state's future prosperity.

Far more consequential than broken suspension systems are broken lives. Families living under extreme economic distress are "out of sight and out of mind" to many citizens, but the facts are clear: One in five children of Michigan continue to live in poverty and that figure has been unchanged for a long time. Many others suffer from abuse, neglect and related traumas in a state that has seen increased child welfare cases due to an inadequate social safety net, health care and educational systems. Families of low- and middle-incomes upended by inaccessible or subpar child care, including the lack of enrichment and afterschool care, are struggling to find ways to keep working uninterrupted or going to school to better themselves, which we know are essential for family stability and sustainability. Vulnerable youth transitioning from foster care face the worst odds for success in the country – and that's right here in Michigan. Roads haven't been the only long-neglected responsibilities of government in Michigan; we've been underfunding our children's welfare and education, too. Their harsh reality is as much a part of our state's landscape this summer as the awe-inspiring dunes of west Michigan or the developing urban shore of the Detroit River.

The good news is that we have an opportunity to change things for the better starting now by reaching out to our elected state leaders while they're spending more time in their home

districts during a break from their Lansing government schedule. With many of their own state races up again in 2020, they will be open to listen. The House and Senate have passed their versions of the state budget, but with revenue and spending decisions still in play over roads and schools, there is a chance for improvements in the final negotiated budget. There's no telling when that'll happen. But by law, that has to take place before the new fiscal year begins Oct. 1, 2019.

At the end of the day, our first-term Governor and Legislative leaders answer to us – the constituents who elected them. It's up to us to own our part and make it clear what we expect of them. Give them a mandate as loud and vigorous as 'fixing the damn roads.' Here's where Michigan's Children has identified some budget priorities. Take these to your lawmakers' in-district coffee hour, or use them as talking points when you call or email their offices to make your desires known.

- Let's put real state dollars into our [child care system](#) by increasing family-income eligibility, thereby allowing more struggling families to receive child care benefits, and increasing reimbursements to our child care providers, many of whom live below poverty, themselves.
- Support the Senate's plan to increase appropriations for [Early On by \\$2.5 million](#) which would assist more families with babies and toddlers with developmental delays, regardless of their income, get the help they need. It still doesn't come close to match our statewide need, but it does continue a commitment for state dollars begun just last year.
- Urge adoption of our [four-point plan](#) to preserve stability for youth in foster care, including incentives for relative caregivers, often the most trusted individuals by youth in foster care. Other points include: support for programs that help reunify families; mentoring support for birth parents; and financing to pave the way for a state-funded Court-Appointed Special Advocates program across Michigan.

Read more about our [recommendations](#) specific to current negotiations in our Budget Basics reports. *(See items in the red box under Current Year State Budget Resources.)* The time to act is now - not down the road. We can and must be a voice for Michigan's children and families.

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