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OPINION

Williams: Don't neglect foster care mental health, help address PTSD in displaced youth

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Brina Williams (Photo: Courtesy photo)

There is a silent epidemic facing foster youth that is going unrecognized and unaided; that epidemic is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Former foster youth are nearly twice as likely to suffer from PTSD as U.S. war veterans, and nearly half of Michigan's 13,000 children and youth in foster care have been exposed to toxic stress and traumatic events... both known causes of PTSD.

More shocking is the lack of aid given to children in the unforgiving system of foster care.

At age 14, I went into care after years of abuse from my mother's ex-boyfriend. After the abuse and an unfit placement, I developed anxiety and severe depression. And I was only receiving standard assistance, not what I really needed.

Mental health is a serious issue for those of us who've lived in Michigan's child welfare system; it's just as important as physical and spiritual health.

Many foster youths go through unspeakable trials, having their innocence and childhoods taken away to be left with PTSD and other mental illnesses. Each reacts differently to

these struggles; without proper guidance and love, many descend into the rabbit hole of drugs and teen pregnancy, at a higher rate than other peers not from the system.

After living with abuse, being in the system and developing depression and anxiety, I had no clue what was happening to me.

I thought I was defective or that I was ruined. I was confused and lost, not unlike what many foster youths feel who battle low self-esteem; many of us feel the world would be better off without us, which is not true.

What is true is that foster youth lack the emotional tools and knowledge needed to understand the traumatic feelings they're experiencing.

How are we supposed to ask for help if we don't know what we need help with? It's imperative that foster youth learn the signs of mental illness and how to help themselves. Youth and all involved adults should be educated about mental illness and trauma.

Read more: [What youth in foster care want, a viewpoint from Halley Miller](#)

Read more: [Help out foster kids, become an advocate, viewpoint from Colleen Mitchell](#)

Another area that should be addressed in child welfare is the need to match a therapist to the youth's needs. It's common for youth to be assigned therapists who quickly wipe their hands of the case unless there are behavioral issues or a need for prescribed medication.

Foster youth will do everything they can to get out of going to therapy. I was one of them. I begged my case worker not to make me go. For many youths in care, opening up to someone symbolizes weakness. Finding the right fit with a therapist and breaking the stigma of mental illness, will help many kids and adults.

As an adult today, I can tell you the effects of PTSD will continue. There will be bad days, but it's OK to seek help. It's OK to say, "this happened to me and I am not any less because of it."

Foster youth, just like anyone else, need love and compassion to navigate this life. Love yourself a little extra today.

Brina Williams is the president of Ingham County's Michigan's Youth Opportunities Initiative and a member of the National Foster Youth Institute's Leadership Corps.