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OPINION

Miller: What youth in foster care want is the same as what others want, a voice

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Halley Miller (Photo: Courtesy photo)

People are shocked when they hear my story, one I often share before large crowds. I'm 20, and in the past five years I've discovered how to use my voice in ways I never thought I could when in foster care.

Learning to use my voice has made it possible to tell my story of sexual abuse and recovery that started before my twin sister and I went into the Michigan foster system, and continued with abuse and neglect inside a foster home.

This I know – had we been encouraged to speak up when we were teens in care, things could have turned out differently.

Maybe my sister wouldn't have been institutionalized in a mental health facility for her emotional scars; maybe I wouldn't have lost 40 pounds in three months because of a preventable but neglectful placement that led me to hoard food with permanent physical and emotional injuries I will cope with for the rest of my life.

More: [Autism insurance is covered by law. So why are some vulnerable children left behind?](#)

Systems and people often fail us. While it would be wrong to solely burden kids in care to notify authorities when things go wrong, kids who are emboldened to speak up have a better chance of surviving bad situations.

Every child who goes into the system needs to know their rights; otherwise, they're made into an invisible population. They should feel safe to speak up, and have access to strong mental health support.

That's still lacking today.

In my case, a child protective service worker never talked to my sister and me when they removed us from our home at age 16. Can you imagine having your life changed and then no one talks to you?

It's not uncommon for youth in the system, those in group homes and those aging out of the system, to feel like we're alone. I felt that way.

Only when my case was being closed out did I learn from the judge that I could have spoken up on my own behalf. My social worker at the time never told us we could even attend any of our hearings. She once told my (biological) mom, "you hatch 'em, we snatch 'em."

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Another time she told me that if my sister and I complained about our treatment in our foster home, we would be removed. The last thing a kid in care wants is to be threatened with separation from their sibling. Fortunately, she's no longer with the state. There are good case workers; I just didn't have one.

I speak publicly on youth rights today. Despite lingering social anxiety, I represent FosterClub, a national network for youth in foster care. I'm currently an intern for FosterClub in Oregon, attending conferences and working for better foster care policies nationally.

Another valuable program that deserves support is the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative. Every case worker should tell kids in care about it. I'm the state president. MYOI teaches you how to cope and grow, develop independence and life success. I wouldn't be in the place I am today without MYOI and the family I have created through it.

Another important program that helps kids in care is CASA (Court-Appointed Special Advocates). This program should be replicated in every Michigan county, though only a fraction have one. One didn't exist when I was in care in Ingham County.

For those in care, getting help and being heard makes all the difference in the world.

Halley Miller lives in Lansing and is a frequent panelist for foster parent training for Child Protection Services.