

How Michigan shortchanges foster children facing life as adult



Michigan has about 13,000 minors in foster care, and experts say the state fails to provide adequate support for the 900 per year who age out of the system.

January 3, 2020 - LANSING — Despite what she’s endured, Lansing resident Brina Williams realizes that among her peers she might consider herself fortunate.

“I know there’s a lot of other people in foster care that have gone through worse experiences than me,” she told Bridge Magazine.

Williams, 18, entered Michigan’s foster system just shy of her 15th birthday after years of what she said was verbal and sexual abuse from her mother’s boyfriend that prompted a family court judge to approve her removal from her home.

So began her journey through foster care, first to a home with a relative, then to a second and third foster care home. She was homeless for a couple weeks.

At times, she said, she was so distraught she cut her skin, starved herself and threw up her food. She had head and stomach aches from acute anxiety and trouble sleeping. In her lowest moments, she thought of suicide.

“It was a lot,” she said.

Related: [A Detroit foster child considered suicide. Then Western Michigan called.](#)

Williams' challenges are anything but rare among an estimated [13,000 Michigan children and young adults](#) in foster care — and approximately 900 who “age out” of the system every year, leaving behind its social supports. Disproportionate numbers suffer from a grim parade of mental health issues and poor educational outcomes, a burden advocates say Michigan's safety net fails to fully address.

The government's ability to help is undercut by several factors, from a state agency charged with protecting vulnerable children not doing its job, to a mental health system that can't reach a sea of traumatized children. Adding to the challenge, Republican lawmakers and Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer recently signed a budget deal that stripped funding that could have expanded a promising advocacy program for foster children.



Former Lansing foster care resident Brina Williams, now a student at Lansing Community College, came through a dark time of depression and suicidal thoughts. (Bridge photo by Ted Roelofs)

“We have created this situation for these kids,” said Michele Corey of Michigan's Children, a Lansing nonprofit advocacy organization. “We have removed them from their families. The state is responsible for their care and we are doing a pretty bad job of it.”

In 2015, a quartet of researchers surveyed 65 former [foster care residents in Michigan ages 23 and 24](#) on a range of mental health issues and educational attainment.

The results are striking — but perhaps not altogether surprising given the harsh conditions, including rampant neglect or physical abuse, that landed children in foster care in the first place.

Nearly three-fourths had at least one mental health diagnosis. A third had three or more mental health disorders, such as post-traumatic stress or depression. Just over a third had a high school degree — compared to about [90 percent](#) of all state residents age 25 and above.

Another survey found that [40 percent of former foster care children in Michigan](#) had been homeless between age 19 and 21.

Echoing [national research](#), one Michigan expert said childhood trauma — a hallmark of foster care youth — stirs changes in brain chemistry associated with layers of ongoing psychological issues like depression and PTSD.

“Trauma impairs childrens’ brains and how they get wired,” said Dr. James Henry, founder and director of the Children’s Trauma Assessment Center at Western Michigan University. Since 1999, the center completed over 5,000 neurological assessments of Michigan children, most of them in the foster care system.

That trauma, Henry said, triggers the release of hormones that are the body’s survival response, resulting in a debilitating “fight or flight” psychological state.

“These children are constantly scanning the environment for emotional danger. Trauma is a trigger of overwhelming powerlessness,” he said.

The behavioral cost of foster care

A national survey of 100,000 children in foster care found a bleak array of mental health outcomes:

- Twice as likely as overall child population to have a learning disability
- Twice as likely to have developmental delays
- Twice as likely to have asthma
- Three times more likely to have ADHD
- Five times more likely to have anxiety
- Six times more likely to have behavioral problems
- Seven times more likely to have depression

Source: Pediatrics, the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics

Henry’s assessment is only reinforced by surveys of the general population that link childhood trauma with [an array of behavioral and physical health issues](#), including higher rates of heart disease and diabetes as well as depression, PTSD, obesity, smoking and heavy drinking.

In the meantime, Michigan’s front line for protecting and treating abused and neglected children appears less than sturdy.

A 2018 state audit of Child Protective Services found the agency [fell short of state requirements](#) for investigations, failed to collect required reports on the safety of children and failed to check criminal backgrounds of parents with histories of abuse.

In 13 percent of the cases reviewed, the agency did not verify or document the safety and whereabouts of children. According to the report, it did not complete criminal background checks in more than 50 percent of cases involving child abuse or neglect.

In a review of 160 investigations of alleged abuse, the audit also found CPS “did not consistently make face-to-face contact with alleged child victims” within the 72 hours its policy dictates.

Making matters worse, a [fractured state mental health treatment system](#) is failing to reach the children who need care.

University of Michigan researchers tracked the occurrence of three of the most common and treatable mental health disorders — depression, anxiety and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) — among children at the national and state levels.

The report they published earlier this year in [JAMA Pediatrics](#) found that nearly one-in-five children in Michigan had been diagnosed with one of the disorders. Of those 100,000 children, about 40 percent were receiving no mental health treatment.

Other research shows that supports intended to ease foster children's transition to adulthood are not being utilized.

In 2012, Michigan extended foster care benefits to age 21 for those who meet qualifying requirements including high school attendance, college enrollment or employment of at least 80 hours a month. The legislation was designed to ease their path to independence.

But according to data from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, barely a third — 623 of 1,740 eligible people — enrolled in the program in the first six months of 2019, leaving a majority with little or no support as they enter a shaky adulthood.

There have also been large geographic gaps in a volunteer advocate network aimed at stabilizing the lives of foster care children and improving their access to community mental health services.

First established in Kalamazoo County in 1984, [Court Appointed Special Advocates](#) (CASA) for children has since grown to 27 counties in Michigan. Appointed by family court judges, volunteers are assigned to advocate for one foster care case at a time. They typically meet with a child once a week and consult with family members, teachers and foster care workers as well. In many cases, they write reports for the court on the status of the child and potential unmet needs.



Patty Sabin, director of Michigan’s volunteer court-appointed support network for foster care children: “This is a broken system.” (Courtesy photo)

But Michigan CASA director Patty Sabin said most foster care children in Michigan have no such special advocate, especially in large swaths of rural Michigan.

“Right now, we only serve 1,500 out of 13,000 in foster care. This is a broken system. A child without an advocate is more likely to fall through the cracks.”

Prior to the budget stalemate between Gov. Whitmer and GOP leadership in 2019, \$500,000 was earmarked for expansion of the CASA program. That was [wiped out](#) as part of Whitmer’s [\\$600 million in administrative transfers](#).

Bob Wheaton, spokesman for MDHHS, told Bridge in a statement that the department “recognizes the challenges often faced by youth who experience foster care, including those who transition or age out of foster care.”

Wheaton said the department has taken steps to address those challenges, including expanding the ability of young people leaving foster care to receive Medicaid up to age 26; publicizing mental health services up to age 23 under Medicaid using periodic screening guidelines; training staff on transition issues facing children leaving foster care, and providing mental health services under a federal grant to young adults transitioning from children’s to adult services.

He added that MDHHS works in partnership with CASA volunteers “to assure children receive services to meet their needs.”

In Kent County, family court judge Patricia Gardner said the CASA program has proven an invaluable resource for the most vulnerable children in foster care.

In 2019, a pool of about 105 CASA volunteers advocated for about 200 children in the county’s foster care system. Operating with a paid staff of 11 and a budget of about \$625,000, it is the largest such program in the state. Gardner said CASA volunteers are typically assigned the most complex and difficult cases.

“In every case, it is good to have a set of eyes and ears just dedicated to the child. For a child it offers a constant.”

Gardner cited a recent example: “We had a case where a child was suspended from school for two weeks for naughty behavior. The CASA got involved and that went from two weeks to two days. That’s the difference they can make.”

She added: “If I had that magic wand, I would have it in every county in the state.”

Her view of CASA’s value to children in foster care is backed by a 2006 summary by the U.S. Department of Justice of CASA programs then in place in 49 states. It concluded that children with a CASA advocate were [less likely to re-enter the foster care system](#), “substantially less likely” to be in long-term foster care and more likely to be adopted than foster care children without a volunteer advocate.

It also found foster care children with a CASA advocate were more likely to receive court-ordered services.

Notwithstanding that evidence, only one Upper Peninsula county — Menominee — has a CASA program for foster care children. Most counties in the northern Lower Peninsula lack one as well.

State CASA director Sabin cited the [written testimonial](#) of a former Kent County foster care child named Leeza, who met a CASA volunteer named Marlene in 1998. That was shortly after she was removed from a home in which both parents were “severe alcoholics.” Leeza recalled how her mother, in a drunken rage, tried to stab her on Leeza’s fifth birthday.

Marlene, Leeza wrote years later, “was the only person I would discuss my home life with. She would pick me up and I would fall asleep in her van because I knew I was safe in her care.

“Each and every child deserves an opportunity to rise against the hand of cards that life deals us.”



At Ferris State University, former foster care resident Heaven Shaman-Page is aiming for a master's degree in social work so she can help others like her. (Courtesy photo)

At Ferris State University north of Grand Rapids, Detroit native Heaven Shaman-Page is charting her own future following the turbulence of more than a decade in and out of foster care in Ohio and Michigan. She's enrolled in a master's degree program in social work, determined to make a difference after graduation for others like her.

She told Bridge she first entered foster care as an infant as her mother struggled with alcoholism and drug abuse. Her father was never in her life. Initially, Heaven went into foster care in Ohio with one of her three brothers. Four years later, they were reunited with her mother in northern Michigan. She went back into foster care after her mother went to jail.

A couple years later — reunited her mother in suburban Detroit — Heaven said her mother left for the store one day just before Thanksgiving. She never came back. At 16, Heaven and her brother were adopted by a couple near Detroit, until she said she was asked to leave at age 18.

Heaven said she's dealt with depression, PTSD and severe anxiety since her teens. Mental health treatment over the years consisted of sporadic visits to counselors that she said did her little good.

"I didn't get the proper mental health services until college, and even then it wasn't enough sometimes," she said.

"But I think the reason I made it is that I wanted to set a good example for my brothers. I wouldn't abandon them the way I was abandoned myself."



Kent County family court judge Patricia Gardner said of special advocates for foster care cases: “If I had that magic wand, I would have it in every county in the state.” (Courtesy photo)

Brina Williams, the Lansing resident, is reunited with her mother. Family court approved the move after her mother broke up with her abusive boyfriend and completed parenting classes with her daughter.

Like Leeza, Williams credits a CASA volunteer as a steadying hand through her struggles in foster care.

“She was just the one thing I could hold onto. I really felt like she was someone I could talk to and trust.”

She said she is now looking forward.

After graduating from high school in 2019, Williams is enrolled at Lansing Community College. Having made honor roll three straight semesters, she has her mind set on a master’s degree in social work. She’s also president of Ingham County’s Michigan’s Youth Opportunities Initiative — which aids foster children in their transition to independence — and is a member of the National Foster Youth Institute’s Leadership Corps.

“I’d like to work with foster care children,” she said, “because that is what I know.”