



School of Social Work

Challenging Minds, Leading Change, Transforming Lives

A Transition to Independence Program Special Event Report

KidSpeak® 2013

Foster Youth Speak Out on Their Foster Care Experiences and Provide Recommendations for Change.

KidSpeak
A youth public forum



KidSpeak® is a project of Michigan's Children in partnership with the Transition to Independence Program, Wayne State University's School of Social Work, WSU Law School, Foster Care Alumni Association of America- Michigan Chapter, & the Park West Foundation.

For questions related to this report, please contact
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2013 KidSpeak Listening Panel Members

There's a lot to be communicated and there's a lot of ignorance and lack of information, and the more of us who share information about what's out there, the more that we can reach the young people who could have these options in Michigan

-Maura Corrigan,
 Michigan Department
 of Human Services



Angela Aufdemberge,
 Vista Maria

Michele Corey,
 Michigan's Children

Hon. Maura Corrigan,
 Michigan Department
 of Human Services

Angelique Day, WSU
 School of Social Work

Debbie Dingell,
 American Automotive
 Policy Council

Kathy Gibson, Wayne
 Regional Education
 Services Authority

Peter Hammer,
 Wayne State
 University Law School

Cameron Hosner,
 Judson Center

Jon Iannucci-Waller,
 Michigan
 Rehabilitation
 Services

Hon. Andrew
 Kandrevas, District
 13, Michigan House
 of Representatives

Joseph Kimbrough,
 Sensible Business
 Consulting Group

Cyekeia Lee, National
 Association for the
 Education of
 Homeless Children
 and Youth

Nancy Lindman,
 Michigan Association
 of United Ways

Nick Metzger, State
 Farm Insurance
 Companies

Hon. Jim Runestad,
 District 6, Oakland
 County Board of
 Commissioners

Hon. Dian Slavens,
 District 21, Michigan
 House of
 Representatives

Hon. Mark Slavins,
 Wayne County 3rd
 Circuit Court

Hon. Jon Switalski,
 District 28, Michigan
 House of
 Representatives

Robert Thomas,
 Foster Care Alumni
 Association of
 America- Michigan
 Chapter

Alice Thompson,
 Wayne State
 University School of
 Social Work, and
 Black Family
 Development

Hon. Rashida Tlaib,
 District 6, Michigan
 House of
 Representatives

Michelle Weemhoff,
 Michigan Council on
 Crime and
 Delinquency

Hon. Adam Zemke,
 District 55, Michigan
 House of
 Representatives



We want to make good policy, and hearing it from you firsthand impacts us.

-Hon. Dian Slavens,
 District 21, Michigan
 House of
 Representatives



2013 KidSpeak Forum

Michigan's Children has long recognized the importance of giving youth a voice in the public debate, providing opportunities for youth to talk about issues concerning them and how they believe these issues might be best addressed. Foster care youth represent a group that is overrepresented in high school dropout statistics, grossly under-enrolled at post-secondary institutions, and often experience unemployment/underemployed as a result. As this population is greatly impacted by many state, federal and local policies, foster youth can offer valuable suggestions for improvement in the child welfare, employment, and K-16 education systems. A total of 23 youth ages 16-24 presented testimony to a distinguished listening panel comprised of members of the Michigan Legislature; state department officials, (including human services, education and workforce development) representatives of private and corporate foundations, and other public officials and community leaders. Youth engaged in these events were either high school or college enrolled students and attendees of one or more summer employment programs in Wayne County. College enrolled students represented various institutions including Saginaw Valley State University, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, Michigan State University, Wayne County Community College District, and Wayne State University. These youth represented 6 different counties including, Bay, Ingham, Macomb, Oakland, Washtenaw, and Wayne. Not only did youth share their concerns, they also provided suggestions that state leaders could use to begin to address their issues, and they expressed their willingness and eagerness to help.

Quotes from youth participants are taken from actual transcripts of the KidSpeak forum. We have made every attempt to ensure the accuracy of their words.



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Foster youth experience difficulties with transportation and accessibility, which impacts their ability to function in their adult lives. Lack of access to reliable transportation can negatively affect their vocational and professional success.

Well with regular kids they go to their parents and their parents teach them how to drive so they get that experience that they need to be successful drivers. Well most of us don't get that...I don't know how to drive. And I'm twenty, so I need a car...I have a business that I'm starting, and transportation is a big issue with my business. I feel like my business could be a lot more successful if I didn't have to catch the bus. It takes two hours to get somewhere where I could drive in twenty minutes.

-Vee

...the transportation system is so broken here, you can barely keep a job...one of my older siblings, she quite often used the transportation system. And she can't keep a job. Um, so those, these issues are so strong and we definitely need to make changes in the system.

-Christina

Foster youth are concerned about having foster care workers who respect confidentiality, providing a safe space for them to share their thoughts and feelings.

I feel that workers should be more confidential with some things that you tell them. If you're having issues with a placement, I don't feel that you know they should go tell the parents exactly what you say, because then it becomes uncomfortable in the household, and that's not really a good thing, cause the issues only get worse.

-Vee

Every child should have basic needs met and right now that's not currently happening. One of those are the right to privacy. I know a few of you guys mentioned not having privacy available to you, where social workers would tell your situation, and make the household a very uncomfortable place to be in. And that's, that's definitely not right, and we want to provide a secure and a safe environment for our youth. And now that's just not something that's being taken, seriously enough.

-Christina

Foster youth desire mentorship and guidance. Mentors can be individuals

other than their assigned social worker or foster care worker, as it can be difficult to be open with these professionals.

Foster children who have business ideas, I think it would be great to have some type of support in advising to the foster youth, with help of what steps need to be taken to have this successful business, and promoting their ideas, and helping them put them into plan to be a successful business owner.

-Vee

One other thing I wanted to talk about was how there should be a, there should be a foster youth mentor for all of the foster care people in foster care...It's hard to talk to social workers about our problems. It really is. So it'd be helpful to have mentors for youth

-Promise

Foster care workers do not consistently demonstrate awareness of resources available to foster youth or effectively communicate about these resources or other important information. This can negatively impact a foster youth's ability to successfully

transition into adulthood.

They were telling me that sources were available, but I just didn't use them, but how did I know about these resources if you don't tell me? ...I think that if something is available to us, that we have immediate access. I don't want to go through this person to get to this person, to get what I need, to get the resources I need to help me...the only problem I really have is having a stable connection and staying connected with the resources I know that can help me...

-Marie

When I asked her [my social worker] about what are the services available to foster youth to go to college, she said, "DHS doesn't have any money. Actually, we have budget cuts. We can't give you anything."...Not aware that there is money for foster youth. Not aware that if your, EFC (Effective Family Contribution) is zero, you will get grants, and things of that sort to go to school. So one of the big issues that I really want to make clear is that there is a lack of communication when it comes down to resources. Foster youth don't know the resources that are available to them, neither do social workers. And in addition to that, I think high school counselors need to be aware of it. This shouldn't be something that is just optional, this needs to be mandatory. It needs to be

penalized if you do not know the resources that are available to your clients.

-Camille

I was not informed of the typo on my birth certificate, as well as my social security card...I applied for college and my worker and my foster mother at that time was aware. I wasn't aware because I didn't have access, I did not have access to my birth certificate, my social security card, things of that nature. My state ID, was [with typo] and also my school ID, my high school diploma, all legal documents, up until I was, nineteen...So when I applied to college, that became, kind of like fraud. Because my name didn't match my social security number, and I had to go back and make that correction.

-Rhonda

Foster youth commonly experience a lack of support and stability, which can impact their academic and professional trajectory. Foster youth often have to make important decisions and navigate complex systems without consistent support.

I never really had that support that I needed to really advance my life. I was independent and I

Googled everything that I could to find out resources for college and things of that sort. I ended up making it to the University of Michigan, not with the assistance of my foster care or my social worker.

-Camille

You don't have parents, um, that can financially support you through college, or even high school, or just in adult phase, it's hard to just make it through by yourself, on your own...when you go home for spring break, summer, winter, vacations, you don't have anywhere to go if you don't have family.

-Rhonda

I did not have a foster parent, but I was institutionalized, going from home to home to home, I never had that stability until this day, I still don't...I aged out at a time where they did not offer the transitional resources that I needed to have stability.

-Marie

I graduated, got my high school diploma, tried postsecondary education, but failed miserably, as I had no support system at that time.

-Robert (2)

This is important to me because with the right supports and services I have received through Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative, I graduated as a first-generation college student. I'm living proof

that when handed the right supports and services, such as permanency, stability, employment opportunities, self worth, employment, security, leadership, and most importantly, family, then these things are things that can happen.

-Sheila

Foster youth experience traumatic separations from kin, which can have a lasting impact on family ties.

I'm one of six. I love my siblings. I'm the big sister. But not having sibling visitations or communication or nothing like that really put a strain on our relationship, and now for the most part, most of us have aged out of the foster care system besides two of my sisters, who are twenty right now, but we really don't even have communication like that. I'm coming from a dysfunctional household. Yes, there was abuse in my household. However, because it was that, our familial bonds were so strong.

-Camille

I am a foster care alumni, and being in the foster care system was one of the most traumatic experiences for me growing up. I am the sixth of seven children and growing up in foster care system was really difficult. For one, my siblings and I were split apart. No one

could take care of seven children, obviously. So we are, we were all separated at a very young age.

-Christina

I feel that with your family, even if they lost rights, you should be able to go visit them. And especially like my dad, he's locked up, he did a lot of things, and, I still love my dad for whatever he did...I believe that I should be able to visit my dad. Because even if he lost his rights, that don't mean you don't love him.

-Robert

Foster youth desire to have meaningful social interactions, but are often isolated from others.

Foster care wants you to feel like a normal child. By normal, I mean like another child who has parents and is not in the system. But they do things that make you feel the opposite. I have been invited to camping trips, slumber parties, and even just a day out with my friends. And I have been told no because my friends will need background checks, but actually, who would be willing to do that?...So I am left out of group events and not even invited anymore because my friends already know that in order for me to spend time with them, or to spend the night, they will have to get background checks.

-Sidney

...I feel there's a lack of communication with my worker, like, you can have somebody to talk to, but also you want to have a good amount of time to spend with your worker instead of one time a month. Because that makes you feel left out. Like, there's no hope, everybody's just losing hope for you.

-Robert

I went through a medium security treatment program and completed in a year and a half. No family visits, and little phone contact from family. My caseworker came out to see me when she had to see another youth. I saw my caseworker every three months as ordered by the state of Michigan..I started as a foster youth and feel like when I was switched to JJ I was ignored and left alone. Left isolated. I now only know what it feels like to be ostracized from a society...the state of Michigan did not have an effective program or policy to ensure foster youth who've switched to JJ turn back foster youth

when their programs are done.

-Robert (2)

Foster youth experience significant financial challenges as they transition into adulthood. These challenges can be especially difficult as foster youth attempt to pursue higher education, limiting their opportunities for academic success.

I'm about to be twenty-three in November, and I got only so much time to spend my ETV money for Wayne State (University) when I start. I start in the fall, I think then I'll only be able to use half of it because they only give \$2500 a semester. And so when the winter comes, I'll be twenty-three, I won't even be able to use the resources.

-Marie

I had an admittance letter from the University of Michigan which is like, the best, top school, but now here I am faced with fears of how am I going to survive at Michigan, how

am I going to have the funding to pay for school?

-Camille

We get around \$500 something a month, and to me, that's not enough because majority of that has to go to the house manager. And after, after we give the money to the house manager, we have to get hygiene on our own...I know we're supposed to get jobs to help us with the money situation, but honestly, there's not jobs out there for teenagers. Like, the summer youth employment program, that's good for the summer, but it's not going to last all year round...how would you feel living off of \$500 a month?...\$500? That's not enough.

-Kiara



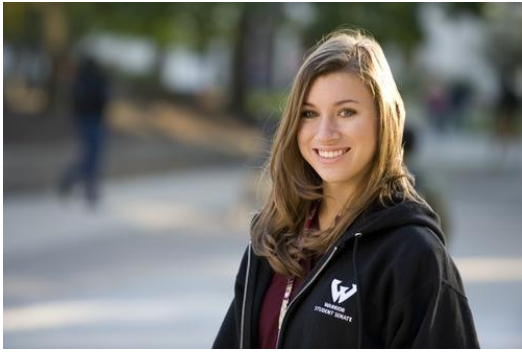
The testimony of the 2013 KidSpeak participants displays the presence of multiple problems in the lives of foster care youth that hinder successful transitions into adulthood. Foster youth desire to become healthy, successful, and independent adults, accomplishing their educational and professional goals, but encounter many challenges along the way: financial difficulties, lack of support and guidance, issues with accessibility. The participants suggest that foster care-related policies and practices reflect a commitment to helping foster youth overcome these challenges.

Kidspeak® is a youth public forum developed by **Michigan's Children** that empowers young people to advocate on their own behalf. Operating on a statewide and local basis, Kidspeak brings youth before listening panels comprised of legislators, other public officials, and community leaders to talk about issues of concern to them. Kidspeak forums provide young people with authentic civic engagement experience and provide policymakers the rare opportunity to hear the voices of young people. Given the opportunity, in ways both poignant and powerful, youths can change the **way adults make decisions**. *Michigan's Children is an independent organization that accepts no government fund, and relies solely on foundation grants and contributions from individuals and corporations to support this work.* Michigan's Children, a non-profit 501 © (3) organization, presents Kidspeak as a non-partisan activity. *To learn more about our programs and how YOU can be a voice for children, contact Michigan's Children. Call: 517.485.3500 or 1.800.330.8674 | Email: info@michiganschildren.org/ Or visit Michigan's Children's website: www.michiganschildren.org.*

The mission of the **Transition to Independence Program (TIP) offered by the Wayne State University School of Social Work** is to increase college access and improve graduation rates of foster care youth from southeast Michigan and advance the educational well-being of youth who age out of foster care throughout the state. TIP carries out this mission through the provision direct services to foster care youth enrolled at Wayne State University, conducting research that examines issues of strategic importance to the child welfare and education service sector, and conducting consultation and training to student support personnel, local, state and federal child welfare, education, and other stakeholders that work with foster care youth. For more information about TIP and how you can get involved in university efforts to improve outcomes for foster care youth, visit TIP website at www.tipwaynestate.org.

The mission of the Foster Care Alumni Association of America-Michigan Chapter (FCAAA) is to connect the alumni community and to transform policy and practice, ensuring opportunity for people in and from foster care. The vision of the FCAAA is to ensure a high quality of life for those in and from foster care through the collective voice of alumni. The FCAAA is working to erase the differences in opportunities and outcomes that exist for people in and from foster care compared to those who have not experienced foster care. The FCAAA believes that alumni of foster care possess an expertise about foster care that is not available anywhere else. Alumni bring the perspective of having lived in foster care and being part of the foster care culture—the shared experience that comes from being in foster care. This perspective and expertise, and the presence and voice of foster care alumni, are essential for influencing public will, creating the best public policy, and continually improving foster care practice. To learn more about the FCAAA, visit <https://www.facebook.com/FCAADetroit>

The Park West Foundation® was formed in 2006, by Mitsie and Albert Scaglione, to support organizations committed to strengthening positive values and leadership that support creative and lasting solutions for youth locally and in communities around the world. The Foundation's priority local commitment became addressing urgent needs of children aging out of foster care in Southeastern Michigan. For more information about the Foundation, visit <http://www.parkwestfoundation.org/park-west-philanthropy/foster-care/parkwest-foster-care.html>



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