



School of Social Work

Challenging Minds, Leading Change, Transforming Lives

Transition to Independence Program

Special Event Report

KIDSPEAK® 2015

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KidSpeak® 2015 was made possible by Michigan's Children in partnership with the Transition to Independence Program, Wayne State University School of Social Work, Wayne State University Law School, the Foster Care Alumni Association of America— Michigan Chapter, and Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative



On August 10th, 2015, seventeen young people currently or formerly served by the foster care system gathered with community stakeholders in the Damon Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University College of Law, to speak to policymakers and local leaders about challenges they encounter. These young people made specific recommendations for changes in policies and programs to make the system work better for others. Quotes from participants are taken from actual transcripts of the KidSpeak forum. We have made every attempt to ensure the accuracy of their words.

Extending the Age of Support to 24

Foster alumni describe the need for ongoing financial and emotional support as they transition to adulthood. Many young adults requested the age of support be extended to age 24, providing reasons for which continued support is needed:

“Financial independence is very hard for a foster youth. We don’t have the family support that most children have as college kids. I myself did not have [this]. We *need* this support—as being former wards of the state, as the former children of the state, the state’s responsibility does not stop at the age of 18. The state has more responsibility to go until the age of 24. At least help the child get into higher education. For example, at Wayne State...the HIGH program...children who have a 2.5 [GPA] and they’re homeless, they are eligible to qualify for university housing. There are ways to solve these issues.”

“I aged out at 19 and I completely had nowhere to go. Because of that I went to my biological mother’s home, which ended in me being incarcerated falsely...And I feel like, to this day as a 25 year old adult, I’m still dealing with those charges because I didn’t have anywhere to go. I had to go with the only person I knew of, and that caused even more harm to me, my life, and my career. So I would like to avoid that happening for any other younger youth growing up and transitioning out of foster care. So their career doesn’t suffer as much as mine.”

“I finally saved up enough money to have an apartment, and my car got stolen, right in front of my apartment. I don’t have family. I mean I have family, but not financially, I don’t have family that are going to help me. Nobody. I mean who do we turn to when we go through crazy events like that? I’m catching the bus, trying to go to school, trying to go to work. And I had Saturday classes, so the buses really act funny on a Saturday, and it was *difficult*. I wanted to give up so many times.”

Extended Counseling Sessions

As part of ongoing support, young adults also describe the need for additional counseling sessions to help them heal from the trauma they have experienced, which continues to impact them as adults.

“More programs should be developed to make longer [counseling] sessions. Because six weeks or eight weeks, or whatever that is a part of anybody’s insurance, is not enough. Kids and youth, they’re dealing with all types of stuff—like going back, being from foster care—a lot of things happened where it’s still [affecting] their adult life...You just can’t give someone a whole bunch of money and expect them— ‘yeah, they’re going to do right,’ and this and that. Sometimes people still mess up with that. They’re still going to the same triggers, same mistakes, I just feel like maybe [there should be] some efforts to make longer counseling sessions, so foster youth can learn more about



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themselves and how to overcome their challenges. And let them know that whatever happened in their past doesn't define them now. They're a whole new person and there are so many opportunities out there."



"At the age of 8, my life was interrupted and condemned by the state of Michigan, DHS, and [A foster care agency]. I was pulled from school very traumatically, after several interviews were conducted by CPS. The trauma from being chased and removed from school, has followed and shaken every interaction I have had since. I suffered post-traumatic stress after being abruptly removed from the only home I had ever known. I'm not telling you about this chapter in my life because I need sympathy. The issues that stem from my trauma are being addressed and I have learned and I am continuing to learn and heal."

Transportation Assistance

Another concern expressed by participants was related to transportation. Young adults need reliable and safe transportation to be independent. Even when they have a vehicle, they may need assistance with related responsibilities such as maintaining insurance and service.



"Bus tickets, I feel like aren't enough to go to school, maintain a job, and make it from [point] A to B. Maybe if the bus system was better, but it's really hard. I remember my second year of college and finishing it, and wanting to stay here in Detroit and not having anywhere to go...I didn't have the money to stay on campus, so I decided to go to [a homeless youth shelter]...I had my work-study job, still minimum wage, \$20 a week. It's not really a lot of money-making, so I was just trying to save money walking...in the summer to go to my work study job. It was a 45-minute walk. There'd be dogs barking and stuff, and I remember one time almost being robbed. I mean, it was a *lot*. I feel like transportation is a big issue and maybe we can get like vehicle vouchers or lower insurance rates, or anything...Even mechanics out here, they don't take you serious. Like me being a woman, going to a mechanic, and my age—I need help getting my car fixed. They take you as a sucker sometimes."



Increasing Awareness and Accessibility of Programs and Resources

Young adults in the forum consistently referred to the need for more information about programs and resources available after aging out. Existing programs do little good if youth do not know they exist or how to access them.



"I was homeless for five months. And two of the five months I found a lot of the programs...Having a 2.5 [GPA] and being able to get stipends for that—going into college, really made a big difference because that gave me something to look forward to. But the awareness was not there. If I was aware of a lot of stuff and if a lot of kids were aware of that, then we would be able to say, 'It's okay. I'm not out there alone.' We just need a lot of awareness, classes, and programs inside the schools. We do stuff in communities, but let's make it a school-based program...That's where they're at, let's take it to them."

"I start college in a couple weeks and there are things that I don't know about when it comes down to college. I just found out about

the TIP [Transition to Independence] Program at Wayne State University. Luckily I was able to get my Tuition Incentive Program letter signed and sent to the school before my deadline came up. And it's the things that we don't know about...it's hard not only for the awareness but also not having that support that you need from being in a residential setting to being completely alone and paying bills. We need that support from more programs where we sit down and talk about problems and issues, or programs like our transitional living program where they teach you about having financial literacy and things that are available to foster care youth."

Improved Communication and Listening

Along with increasing knowledge of available programs, former foster youth wanted more communication about current placements and case plans while in care. They also discussed the importance of listening and trying to understand the youth's perspective.

"I think that the foster care program, should honestly listen, and for children like me to be heard, and [for professionals] to answer the phone. Until this [Kidspeak], I feel like the foster care program is a lot of lack of communication...I had hard times getting in touch with my worker and stuff."

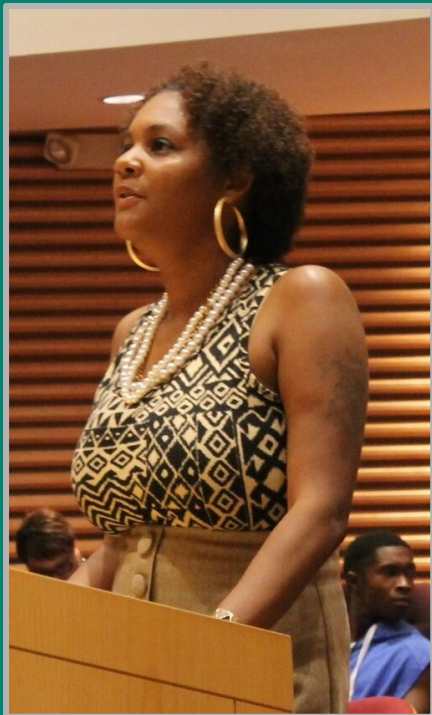
"I suffered post-traumatic stress after being abruptly removed from the only home I had ever known. I was then told numerous times and numerous ways that the most constant relationship I would ever have, was unfit and needed correction. I was told that my mother, my first love, was unfit and that she had abused me. I was not given any say-so in how to properly correct the transgressions. Instead, I was forced into a foster home where I actually felt all the charges that were held against my mother were mine. I became aggressive and abusive, because I felt that everyone around me was. So instead of trying to understand, my foster mother would punish me, only conditioning me to become more and more aggressive and angry... I also ask that for youth who are already abruptly removed, that you take the responsibility for what you have done; that you respectfully explain to them why their home is not conducive. You listen to them and understand that listening and hearing are different. Listening requires compassion. I ask that you acknowledge their feelings, no matter how choppy they express them. Validation is needed."

Reducing the Number of Placement Moves

Foster youth often experience frequent changes in placement, which can impact relationships, education, and employment, well into adulthood. Multiple placements also increase the number of people with the youths' personal information.

"I've been in and out of the system since I was seven. I aged out at 19 and, I just want to say that because of my transition, I went to 24 different foster homes and I feel like, it wasn't because I was a troublesome youth. It was because I was something called a temporary ward of the court, and as a temporary ward of the court, and as a temporary ward you don't know if you're going back home or if you're going to stay in foster care permanently. So you transition from home

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to home, based on caregivers that are willing to accept a teenager. So because of that I was moved over 24 different times, which is, pretty difficult to do. Even in my adulthood, I’m having trouble staying stable in one position because of the past and moving. So one thing I would like to address, for teenage foster youth—try to find a stable home, a stable program. Because it does more harm to move them around the world, just to make sure they have somewhere to lay. It’s causing more psychological harm than people are aware of.”

“There are a lot of people who get access to crucial information [for foster youth]. House Bill 4022 is the Foster Care Identification Protection Act. In the state of Michigan, when you get adopted—I know this because I went through the process—your social security number gets changed; your last name, if you choose, gets changed as well. Now I brought up social security because a lot of your information gets exchanged through caseworkers, foster homes—now there’s 24 parents who’ve had your information...House Bill 4022 is set up to where we have credit checks for the children, just to be sure that their credit, when they go to apply for financial aid later in life, they aren’t like ‘why do I have seven water bills in my name?’ It’s just for protection of the children.”

Keeping Siblings Together

Another issue that stems from multiple placement moves, is the likelihood of becoming separated from siblings. Young adults referred to the distress this separation caused and the importance of remaining in contact.

“I was in 15 different foster homes, in a matter of 4 years...And one of the things for me, that had a lot to do with my moves, is that I am the oldest of six. My mother had six children. Before entering the foster care system, I was the mini-mother. So, my brothers and sisters were very important to me...I got in trouble for sneaking to use the phone, for not coming back on time. And a lot of that stemmed from reaching out to my younger siblings...There are people who, get separated from their siblings and never ever see them again. And for me that’s an issue...I know what it’s like to be apart from my younger siblings. I need them; they need me. And so when you’re making decisions for the foster care system, and you’re looking at things that need to be fixed, I want you to think about if someone told you, that you couldn’t see your brother or sister again; if someone stripped you of that bond.”

“My little sister, she was taken from my mother when she was born. And she was adopted. But I was the only one on her maternal side who actually had contact with her. I have not seen her since she was five. It’s sad that I can’t see a child that is a shining star at the age of 11, now. It hurts me, but it’s something I have to deal with. I have asked my caseworker...to help me look for her and no one could ever pull my file. I can’t get a number, an address, or anything. I’ve tried so many ways to get in contact with her and I can’t.”

Empowering Themselves and Others

Overwhelmingly, participants discussed the importance of ongoing relationships with supportive adults and expressed a desire to help improve the foster care system for others. These young adults provide examples of what inspires them, in a persuasive call to action for policy and decision-makers to help them create positive change in the lives of foster youth.

“The hardest part about transitioning from foster care, is looking behind you and seeing others struggle with similar situations. I wish I would have had someone tell me that I am somebody, or show me how to get resources. They don’t keep up with me. I don’t feel like I’m listened to. These statements heard all too often, really have no meaning; really are just words until a plan is in action...What helped me on my journey the most was being free to express myself. Having two mentors my same sex, one mentor my opposite—a support system where I wasn’t judged, a trusting relationship with both my caseworker and foster parent. And, my comfort, safety, and dignity being a top priority. To all of my fellow foster care alumni and foster care family, we are all we have, and that’s as much as you make it.”

“The issues that stem from my trauma are being addressed and I have learned and I am continuing to learn and heal. I now am a rising star. I am a senior [in college] and employed with [a social service agency]. I work with foster youth in my spare time and in the hopes that they can surpass my success. I am telling you about my story so that you can acknowledge the sad reality of the removal process of foster children from their homes. The problem is that CPS workers, judges, and referees fail to acknowledge and address that a child, no matter how poor the conditions, understands the place that they stay as a home. Through that home, an identity has been built. And when abruptly removed, you destroyed the only constant that exists for that child. The ramifications for the child are permanent. There is no undoing the damage. So I ask that you find a new way of removing children from their homes that respects the process and innocence of their youth; to create process that does not operate by a child running down a hallway screaming for their mother. That does not make a child feel as though they are at fault for what has occurred.”

“Part of the reason I have been so successful, as far as school goes and as far as work goes, it’s because I look at my younger siblings as inspiration. I want them to see what I do and know that they can do it; we came from the same place... And the reason I went so far in school, is because I feel like I couldn’t just tell them, I had to show them. But in order to show them, they had to be there. They had to be there to see what I was doing so that they could do it. And I know a lot of kids in foster care don’t have that. They don’t have their sister right there. I yell at them, I chastise them, and I talk to them about grades and all that. I couldn’t imagine being one of those kids who didn’t get to reunite with their siblings. So when you’re making these decisions, I want you to think about how you would feel if someone did that. If you’re life was shaking like that. So, if I had to pick one thing, my one thing would be to correct sibling separation.”

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Kidspeak 2015 Listening Panel Members

Ellyn Ackerman, Department of Health and Human Services,
Michigan State Senate

Angela Aufdemberge, President and CEO, Vista Maria,
Transition to Independence Program Board Member

Janee' Ayers, Detroit City Council

Elizabeth Bauer, W-A-Y Academy of Detroit BOD

Stacie Bladen, Department Director of Children's Service Agency,
Department of Health and Human Services

Frances Carley, Department of Health and Human Services
Committee, Michigan State Senate

Cynthia Cook, Wayne RESA

Ghida Dagher, United Way for South East Michigan

Michelle Fecteau, Michigan Board of Education

Matthew Gilliard, President and CEO, Michigan's Children

Cameron Hosner, CEO, Judson Center,

Transition to Independence Program Board Member

Janet Kaley, Department of Health and Human Services Education Unit

Senator Mike Kowall, Michigan State Senate

Jim Runestad, Michigan State House of Representatives

Mary Sutton, Michigan After School Partnership

Robert Thomas, Foster Care Alumni of America, Michigan Chapter

Alice Thompson, Black Family Development, INC

Ken Toll, United Way of Jackson

Cheryl Waites, Dean of the School of Social Work, Wayne State University

Khadija Walker-Fobbs, Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative,

Transition to Independence Program Board Member

Jacqueline Wilson, Wayne State University First Lady

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