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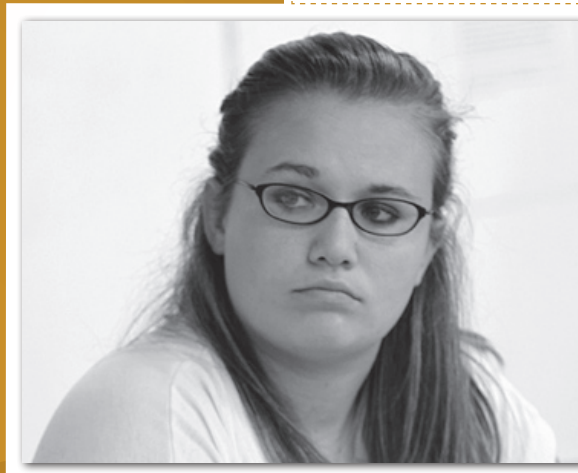
Discussing Issues and Concerns of Michigan Youth in Foster Care

VOICE is designed to ensure that young people in foster care have a way to share their concerns and ideas for child welfare improvement. The first two VOICE documents were developed in 2005 and 2007. In June 2010, sixteen representatives of the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI) sites came together to create the third update.

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This is our advocacy document.

Although we are extremely resilient, we know that youth in foster care still face negative outcomes across all major life areas. Based on a study from Cutler Consulting, prepared for the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative in 2009:



- 25 percent of foster youth have not graduated high school or received a GED (compared to 13 percent of the general population.)¹
- 71 percent of females have become pregnant at least once before the age of 21 (compared to 34 percent of general population.)²
- Males are four times and females 10 times more likely to have ever been arrested than the general population.³

Clearly, early pregnancies, lack of a high school diploma or GED and contact with the criminal justice system put extreme limits on the opportunity for post-secondary education, employment and the ability to maintain a livable wage. However, as the Cost Avoidance study outlines, while the cost to states and youth is high for these negative

outcomes, the outcomes are preventable by providing quality services and permanent relationships. The Cost Avoidance Study states "... all that is needed is the political will and leadership required to make the necessary investments."⁴

Our intention is to highlight the progress that has been made and bring to light some of the challenges that still exist. Many of those challenges may be eliminated by reaching out to youth and caseworkers. We have found that sometimes when there is policy in place or resources available we do not know about it. However, we must acknowledge that progress has been made in the child welfare system because of strong federal, state and county administrators, supervisors, managers, and workers *listening to youth*, providing funding, staff and advocating for our success.

¹ Cutler Consulting, 2009 *Cost Avoidance: Bolstering the Economic Case for Investing In Youth Aging Out of Foster Care.*

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

“If you have that one person, you have a chance.”

- Anonymous

“Teens need to be stable and know that someone is there to listen”

- Amy

Progress

We are grateful that the VOICE documents have been read and that child welfare professionals and the state legislature have listened to our concerns. We want to say “Thank You!” by recognizing all of the hard work and progress that has been made since VOICE 2 was written almost three years ago. The following is just a short list of some of the positive changes that have occurred that can lead to a significant impact in our lives and the lives of our brothers, sisters and peers.

Educational Planners: The Department of Human Services (DHS) created 14 new education planner positions to support foster youth in obtaining the educational services they need to graduate high school and plan for post-secondary education. Education planners will work in the sites below:

- Wayne
- Macomb
- Oakland
- Genesee
- Kent
- Ingham / Barry / Eaton
- Jackson / Washtenaw / Lenawee / Monroe
- Isabella / Midland / Saginaw / Bay / Arenac
- Barrien / Cass / St. Joseph / Van Buren
- Calhoun / Kalamazoo / Branch / Hillsdale

Educational Consistency: Children and youth in foster care have a hard time staying at grade level because of their frequent moves. Now, thanks to federal law and DHS policy, children in Michigan entering foster care or changing foster care placements may continue to remain in their school of origin when it is in their best interest. A foster child entering out-of-home placement is eligible for services such as transportation to their school of origin. When a school move is unavoidable, students must be enrolled in the new school within five days.

Foster Care Transitional Medicaid: In 2008, as a response to VOICE 2 and the advocacy of MYOI youth, DHS extended Medicaid coverage until the age of 21 for youth who age out of foster care at age 18 or older. In addition, DHS provided foster care workers with in-service training, posted information on www.michigan.gov/fyit, developed a brochure, and presented at the state teen conference. Although much has been accomplished, there is room for improvement. DHS must ensure that youth and workers know about the program, especially for those of us who have already aged out.**tinued)**

Foster Care to 20: In certain circumstances, Michigan youth have been able to remain in foster care until the age of 20. DHS is in the process of re-defining what foster care looks like for older youth to make sure it is age appropriate. Michigan is in hard economic

times and we appreciate how difficult it can be to find the dollars. It is important to extend foster care to age 20 because young people are just not ready to be on their own at 18 or 19. Parents of intact families know this about their children. Please help us!

Michigan Works! Agency Referral: DHS now requires that youth ages 14 and older without a goal of reunification be referred to a Michigan Works! Agency. The referral supports youth in accessing employment training and services.

DHS Residential Unit: DHS developed a special unit of staff that focuses on reviewing cases where youth are or have been in a residential placement for an extended period of time. The goal is to

make sure that no one is placed or stays in a residential placement unless it is really necessary.

Permanency Teaming and Policy: DHS is piloting a youth-driven teaming model that focuses on finding permanent connections for youth. DHS trained 22 counties in permanency teaming casework.

DHS incorporated permanency planning work into foster care policy, which makes sure that each youth has

the opportunity to develop a permanent and lasting connection with a caring adult.

Foster Home Recruitment: DHS increased its recruitment efforts for foster homes for older youth. DHS county offices and private agencies are developing county-level plans and developing plans to find families that match each child or youth. Youth who developed VOICE in 2005 also outlined this priority.

MYOI Expansion: Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative expanded to 8 new sites in fiscal year 2010 including, Barry/Eaton, Chippewa/Luce, Gogebic/Ontonagon, Ingham, Kalamazoo, Marquette, Oakland, and St. Clair counties. Each site is in the process of developing a youth board and enrolling youth in the Opportunity Passport™. As of July 2010, 23 sites have MYOI youth boards. Initially, MYOI was funded by a grant from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. As the program expanded DHS dedicated federal and state funding to continue the program. We really appreciate that commitment!

Statewide Youth Board: Each MYOI site sends representatives to the state youth board. In addition to developing VOICE 3, the state youth board will provide feedback and suggestions for policy and practices affecting older youth in care.



Rights of youth in Foster Care

We believe that youth in foster care have basic rights. We believe these rights are the same as youth or adults not in foster care. While these rights may seem obvious, we have found that sometimes youth in foster care feel they don't have any rights. Therefore, we are listing them explicitly. We hope that by listening to us and addressing some of the challenges our rights will be recognized and reinforced.

Participate, Heard and Respected: All youth deserve to be respected, listened to, have input and participate in their case plan.

Permanent Support: All youth deserve to have legal or morally committed permanent, supportive, lifelong relationships whether with their birth family, foster family or friends.

Race, Religion and Sexuality: Children and youth of color are overrepresented in foster care. Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgendered youth are overrepresented in foster care. Reasons for these disparities differ. Regardless of the reason, all youth deserve to have their race, ethnicity, religion and sexuality respected and supported.

Life Skills for Interdependence & Independence: All youth deserve opportunities to learn independent living skills, as well as the skills to work interdependently with peers, family, friends and professionals.

Education: All youth deserve a quality high school education and an opportunity to attend a post-secondary school. In school, all youth deserve training, support and protection from bullying.

Health: All youth deserve to be physically, mentally and emotionally

healthy. In addition, all youth deserve to have comprehensive education and support for sexual health, nutrition, depression, suicide prevention, healthy relationships and violence prevention. All youth deserve to have skills in coping, self-esteem and self worth.



Transportation: All youth deserve to have a safe and reliable means of transportation and an affordable and straightforward process for acquiring a driver's license.

Housing: All youth deserve safe, stable and affordable housing including private space in foster homes and training on tenant-landlord rights.

Employment: All youth deserve to be well-prepared for employment and provided assistance in finding jobs.

Financial Literacy: All youth deserve to be financially literate, have access to credit counseling, and have a checking and savings account.

Connection to Resources: All youth deserve to be connected to all of the funds and services available to them.

Accountability, Awareness and Improvement Priorities

There is policy in place that requires sibling visitation, youth involvement in case planning, family visits, lawyer contacts with youth, reunification assistance, and independent living eligibility for foster youth who are mothers. Despite policy, we are still not receiving the quality services that are necessary for our success. While we truly appreciate the effort that has occurred to improve services in these areas, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. Below are our top six remaining concerns.

Staying connected with our siblings

Issue: We do not have enough quality time with our siblings. Too often we are separated from our siblings. Our brothers and sisters are often our strongest connection to our family and have been a critical support system for us.

Not seeing our siblings causes anxiety, pain and depression. Not having these relationships makes it harder for us to return home or feel bonded to our family. The less time we have with our siblings the less likely we are to have that permanent relationship in our lives as adults. Regular visits with our siblings helps us to maintain healthy relationships, stay connected with our families, and provides us with a feeling of support and hope. Visits once a month are not enough!

Current Policy: Sibling visitations should be held at least monthly. Other contacts such as letters or phone calls should occur monthly. Sibling visitation plans must be developed and include dates, location and duration of visits.

Additional Policy and Practice Changes Needed: DHS must make sure that all youth actually have regular visits. Visits should be increased from monthly to bi-monthly. Siblings need each other regardless of how far they live from one another. Therefore, if one of our brothers or sisters is placed over 50 miles away or out of state, sibling visitation should still be required. Adoption should not prevent us from seeing our brothers or sisters. If being adopted means that we will not be able to see our siblings, less of us will want to be adopted. DHS should not allow adoptive parents to end sibling visitation.

Says who? Studies have indicated that youth who keep in some contact with their birth families benefit from these relationships. Maintaining positive connections to birth families, siblings, and kin is critical to the positive development of youth regardless of how long they spend in out-of-home care.

Bernstein, 2000, Berrick, Needell, Barth, & Johnson-Reid, 1998, Casey Family programs, 2000

Making sure we're in the center of our planning

Issue: We are not consistently involved with our case planning or a part of our permanency planning conferences (PPC). Only some of us are engaged in our service planning. In addition, the PPC meetings are only held when there is an emergency or change of placement.

We need to be actively involved in our case planning on a quarterly basis, at a minimum. We should not have to disrupt a placement in order to have a voice in our lives.

Current Policy: Youth are supposed to be involved in developing their service plan and placement decisions.

Additional Policy and Practice Changes Needed:

Make sure that we have an active role in developing our case plan and that we understand what resources are available for helping us share our opinions. Caseworkers should be trained in how to build relationships with older youth. DHS should enforce that PPCs must be attended by the youth. Quarterly meetings should be established to hear from us and our support team. While we might be asked to share our thoughts, we need assistance in defining specific short and long term goals, as well as identifying a support person to help us along the way.

"Just because the parent's rights are terminated, doesn't mean the sibling's rights are terminated"

- Jason

Says who? Research has found that, not only do foster youth who participate in case planning feel less impotent about crucial decisions in their lives, but giving them encouragement and an opportunity to formulate and share their views provides a powerful antidote to insecurity and fear, whether or not their wishes are actually granted.

Catherine J. Ross, *Special Issue on Legal Representation of Children: Responses to the conference: A place at the table: Creating Presence and Voice for Teenagers in dependency proceedings*, 6 NEV. L. J. 1362 (2006).

Reconnecting us with our birth families

Issue: We all need our families. Family for us may be our parents, half, step or full siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, step parents or close friends. Even if it is not an option for us to live with them, they are still a part of who we are. They are our connection to our history and the only real support system we have known. Regardless of placement or termination of rights, we need to have relationships with our family. We need support in navigating healthy communication and visits with all of our family members. As older youth in foster care, many of us have been in the system for several years without a permanent placement or relationship. While family relationships *should* continue from the time we enter care until we leave the system, that has not always happened.

Current Policy: Policy states that for temporary court wards the parent's treatment plan and service agreement must outline the roles and responsibilities of members of the extended family.

Additional Policy and Practice Changes Needed: Make sure that workers ask us who we consider as family? Require workers to connect us or re-connect us to our family and help us build relationships with our family and extended family, even if efforts failed years ago. Enough time may have passed, our family's situations may have changed, or sometimes they did not even know we were still in foster care.

Says who? The Casey Young Adult Survey interviewed 542 alumni of foster care (ages 19, 22 and 25) who were previously enrolled in Casey Family Programs' foster care, adoption or guardianship services. The vast majority of young adults (87.9%) reported being in contact with their biological families at the time of interview.

Havalchak, White & O'Brien, 2008.

"Youth should have a choice whether they would like to reconnect with parents, when appropriate."

- Bobbie Jo



Giving us a voice in court

Issue: We do not see our lawyer-guardian ad litem (LGAL). We are not always aware of our court dates or that we should attend. Our LGALs are supposed to be representing us. Yet, often we do not hear from them at all. If we do hear from them it is right before the court date. We don't have time to build relationships with them so we can trust them enough to talk to them. Also, we do not always know what types of information they need to know. Regardless of how well our case planning is going, many of the most important decisions are made in court. We need to be there with representatives who understand us, our case and what we want the court to know.

Current Policy: The state must appoint an LGAL to represent the youth. DHS foster care workers should facilitate communication between the youth and the LGAL, who must explain the proceedings of the hearing and obtain the youth's views on their permanency plan. The LGAL must monitor the implementation of the services plan and present the wishes of the youth in court. If the lawyer-guardian and youth disagree, the LGAL must present both views.

Additional Policy and Practice Changes Needed: Make sure that current policy is implemented and that youth understand what they should expect from the LGAL. Require that youth ages 14-20 be present at their court hearing unless they sign a refusal form. Require that youth have at least one hour to discuss their case with the LGAL, at least one week prior to the hearing. Require a follow-up call one day prior to the hearing. Provide an efficient process for youth to contact the court if they are not being fully engaged by their LGAL.

"My GAL told me I'm not allowed to talk to my judge and she put me out of the court when court started"

- Robert

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Havalchak, White & O'Brien, 2008.



Helping us and our birth families to reunify

Issue: While we may be excited to return home, the transition can still be difficult. Often, we have spent a long time in the system and in multiple placements. Also, we don't usually receive family therapy so there may be some unresolved challenges that come up. We need time and support to work through those challenges so we can have a stable home with our parents and siblings.

Current Policy: The worker must plan a process for reunification which includes gradually increasing parenting time. The worker must negotiate post-placement services for up to 90 days after reunification. During the first month back home the worker must visit weekly with the parent and youth. After the first month the worker must visit at least twice a month.

Additional Policy and Practice Changes

Needed: Require monthly visits to be provided for one year after reunification. Require workers to talk to us in private during the monthly visit. Provide us and our families with more information about reunification services available. Make sure policy is enforced.

"If a foster youth is going to transition back into the family home, they have to feel like they belong in that family"

- Steven

Mothers Remain in Independent Living

Issue: Young women in foster care who become pregnant or have children may be ready to live in an independent living placement (IL). Independent living provides them with the opportunity to be responsible parents but still have the support they need for education and employment. However, once they are placed in IL and receive the IL stipend, they are not allowed to receive cash and food assistance, even though they are in need.

Current Policy: A committee was recently formed to address this issue. Both cash assistance and program offices were represented. The committee is in the process of revising foster care policy as well as the data systems to allow for mother to be in IL placement and receive the most appropriate funding, whether it is the IL stipend and/or cash and food assistance.

Additional Policy and Practice Changes

Needed: Ensure that foster care workers have access to allow a mother in foster care to receive all appropriate funding. Provide information on the new change in policy and data systems to foster care and cash assistance workers. Provide outreach to mothers in foster care so they are aware of and understand what placement and funding opportunities are available to them.

Says who? "The brain of an 18-year-old college freshman is still far from resembling the brain of someone in their mid-twenties... When do we reach adulthood? It might be much later than we traditionally think."

Abigail Baird, *Human Brain Mapping*, "Anatomical Changes in the Emerging Adult Brain," Nov. 29, 2005.

Says who? Among young women, motherhood is a barrier to employment and attaining higher wages... The fact that so many former foster youth are parents early in the transition to adulthood, and the extent to which parenting influences employment for former foster youth, calls into question the adequacy of current policy directed at this population.

Jennifer L. Hook, Partners for Our Children, University of Washington and Mark Courtney, Chapin Hall, Partners for Our Children, University of Washington, "Employment of Former Foster Youth as Young Adults: Evidence from the Midwest Study".



New Priorities

We have experienced challenges when it comes to obtaining our medical history, having enough funds for college tuition and being able to rely on programs to serve us. Our concerns and how they could be addressed are described below.

Medical History

Issue: We need access to our medical history in order to make knowledgeable health decisions. Often when we come in to foster care we lose connections to our family. Therefore, we lose critical information about our history. It is rare for workers to ask our birth parents about their medical history or tell us about our medical history. Even if we do not have any emergencies as a child, we may still have medical concerns or opportunities for prevention that we miss out on without this information.

Changes Needed: Ensure that all child protective services and foster care workers have a confidential process for birth parents to share their medical records with their children.

Says who? Tracing the illnesses suffered by your parents, grandparents, and other blood relatives can help your doctor predict the disorders to which you may be at risk and take action to keep you and your family healthy.

Surgeon General's Family Health History Initiative, <http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/>



Tuition Waiver

Issue: We need full tuition waivers for post-secondary school. Youth in foster care are less likely to attend and graduate from college in part due to a lack of resources. While many non-foster youth get assistance for college from their families, youth in foster care do not have that opportunity. In addition, they may graduate from high school later than a youth not in foster care due to changing foster homes and schools. Funding sources may only be available until age 21. The age limitation makes many of us in foster care ineligible.

Changes Needed: Make tuition waivers available for vocational, community and four-year colleges and institutions. In addition, increase the age restrictions on scholarships and the federal Educational Training Voucher program to 24 years old for us, regardless of when we first access them. These changes will break down the many barriers we face in meeting our educational and career goals.

Says who? Several states have adopted tuition waiver programs to help address the low rates of college attendance and completion among foster youth by making college more affordable for them. Less than 20 percent of college eligible foster youth go on to higher education compared to 60 percent of youth in the general population. Moreover, only about one-to-five percent of foster youth earn bachelor's degrees. The low rates of college attendance and completion among foster youth can be attributed to a variety of factors, including significant financial barriers to higher education. Many foster youth lack families who can help pay for their tuition, co-sign their college loans, or provide them with a free place to live while they're attending college or during school breaks. Waivers of tuition and fees help reduce the financial barriers to higher education for foster youth.

Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, American Bar Association and Casey Family Programs, Foster Care and Education Q & A: Tuition and Waivers for Post Secondary Education, 2008.

*"In order to have a healthy and safe life,
it is crucial for youth to have access to all
obtainable medical records"*

- Kimberly



Youth In Transition (YIT) & Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI) Consistency & Transparency

Issue: We do not have local information on the policy for YIT or amount of available funds. In addition, sometimes the funds are used for contracts that provide independent living training even though that is not the best use of the funding.

While we do receive a local allocation for MYOI every year, it is uncertain what the funds will cover and what ages will be eligible. In addition, our coordinators tend to have three-to-five additional responsibilities so sometimes we don't get to participate in events based on a lack of staff.

Changes Needed: Require that youth have input into how YIT is spent, such as contracts or youth requests.

Require that each county receiving YIT funding publicly post their policy for distributing funds, allowable requests, and the process and timeline for requests, as well as a process for disputing a declined YIT request.

Require that DHS allocate a set amount of funds for the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative youth boards, training and individual development accounts. Additionally, require that DHS provide at least a part-time staffing allocation for each MYOI site.

*“MYOI and the resources from YIT and last a lifetime”
- Kimberly E.*

Says who? Currently, the only public access to information on Chafee funding is through the National Resource Center for Youth Development website. Youth do not have input in deciding how Chafee funds are distributed or the local process for accessing them. In addition, there has not been a set amount of funds consistently available for the MYOI.

Request

*“Sometimes, the only one I had to talk to was my cat”
- Danielle*

We want relationships with our parents, siblings and extended families. We also recognize that sometimes living with them may not be best for our future success. We want you to know that we can make good decisions for ourselves, but we need to be included in **all** conversations about our case, even the hard ones. Honesty **is** the best policy. The more we know about ourselves and our history, the better we can understand ourselves, have more self-worth and therefore face more positive futures.

Treat us as individuals and our cases as unique. Listen to us. See us often. Ask us our opinion.

Make sure we have all of the identification documents that we need like a picture ID, driver's license, birth certificate, Social Security card and passport. Make sure we are connected to all of the funding, resources, services and **family** that are available to us. We want the best for ourselves, our siblings and all of the young people in foster care.

*“I don't think foster parents realize it isn't only hard to be a foster parent, it's hard to be a foster kid.”
- Bobbie Jo*

*“The people that work with me should get to know me better”
- Robert*

*“Let youth speak up about their permanent placement”
- Danielle*

*“I had just graduated, just moved out on my own, I needed to have support from my caseworker and I felt they were just pushing me to the next person.”
- Kayla*

MYOI Highlights

We are proud of the work we are doing to engage youth, advocate for our needs, and provide learning opportunities for our peers. Here are some of the ways we advocate around the state:

- Present on panels including Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education, State Court Administrative Office, Child Welfare Training Institute and the Foster Care Review Board.
- Represent Michigan in national youth leadership programs such as Foster Club All Stars and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities' Youth Leadership Institute.
- Participate in training videos.
- Participate in administrative meetings on the implementation of the federal Fostering Connections Act.
- Help our local coordinators with fund-raising and building community partners.
- Provide an annual conference for youth, foster parents and foster care workers.
- Volunteer in our communities!



There are 27 MYOI sites listed below.

| | |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| Alpena / Presque Isle | Livingston |
| Antrim / Kalkaska | Macomb |
| Barry / Easton | Marquette |
| Bay / Arenac | Mecosta / Osceola |
| Benzie / Manistee | Midland / Isabella |
| Charlevoix / Emmet | Oakland |
| Chippewa / Luce | Ogemaw / Roscommon |
| Crawford / Ostego | Ottawa |
| Genesee | Saginaw |
| Gogebic / Ontonagon | St. Clair |
| Grand Traverse / Leelanau | Washtenaw |
| Ingham | Wayne |
| Kalamazoo | Wexford / Missaukee |
| Kent | |



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DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

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