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How Does Michigan Fare in the Fight to Improve Outcomes for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care? A Response from the State and One of Its Communities

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Background and History

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, one-half-million children are in foster care at any given time, some of whom are over the age of 16. Every year, typically at the age of 18, approximately 20,000 of these children will age out of the foster care system. Many of these youths find themselves making an abrupt transition to adulthood and independence with little or no assistance from their caregivers, biological families, or the child welfare system. Unlike their same-age peers in the general population, they have no safety net if they fail to succeed at navigating the adult world. Eyster and Oldmixon (2007) note that in the general population, approximately half of the youth ages 18-24 continue to live at home. At the same time, some form of parental support is provided for young adults in their early 20s whether they live at home or not.

National Findings

Foster care youth are not as fortunate. In most states, youth do not continue to receive support from the foster care system when they are released from the state's custody at the age of 18. These youth—and society—suffer the consequences of not having a structured system in place to address the complexities that they will most likely encounter as they age out of foster care.

Numerous studies have been conducted that highlight troubling outcomes that include illegal drug use, teen pregnancy and early parenthood, homelessness, crime, and unemployment. Other troubling

factors are physical and mental health issues. Pecora (2006) found that emancipated youth are more prone than the general population to a number of mental disorders, including panic disorders, anxiety disorders, depression, and social phobias. Most troubling is the fact that 25 percent of emancipated youth experienced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), almost double the rate of the U.S. war veterans. Pecora (2006).

A study conducted by Ryan, Hernandez, and Hertz (2007) investigated male adolescents living in congregate care facilities in New York who were transitioning out of foster care. They interviewed both child welfare professionals and the young adults regarding their preparation for living independently. Their findings were consistent with previous studies conducted by the National Foster Care Project (2000) and Courtney et al., (2005) that indicated that youth are less likely to succeed after exiting foster care if they lack basic living skills, employment skills, housing, health care, and familial support.

Based upon the information gleaned from this study, agencies should have a systematic plan for foster children to leave the system, at the time they enter the system. This can be achieved through kinship care, returning them to their parents, or adoption. If these options are not available, agencies should be required to have a permanency planning goal for those age 13 and older to transition out of foster care. A second recommendation emerged from the findings, which stated that collaborative specialized services that focus on education and job training opportunities are needed. To achieve this, states should provide an adequate number of staff, including educational coordinators,

to ensure that no youth exit foster care without a GED or high school diploma. A final recommendation centered on some form of aftercare. Youth should be monitored for at least one year post-discharge to ensure that they have transitioned successfully, meaning they have employment, housing, access to health care, and adult support, which could be a family member or mentor.

In a similar study, Geenen and Powers (2007) used qualitative data to examine the experiences of youth transitioning out of foster care. These researchers interviewed foster parents, child welfare professionals, and transitional youth to capture the experiences of youth aging out of the system. Several themes emerged:

- (1) *Self-determination or autonomy*: The foster care youth and alumni felt that they had little or no experience in making important life decisions while they were in foster care, yet they were supposed to have the skills necessary to transition into independent living once they aged out of the system.
- (2) *Coordination/collaboration of services*: This was a dominant theme. Youth had difficulty interfacing with the various systems and agencies. They indicated that there was duplication of services, role ambiguity, lack of communication among providers, and disparity in services.
- (3) *Family relationships*: A stable, positive relationship was described as a major component for successful transition. Many of the youth in this study indicated that they had experienced uncertainty and instability for much of their lives and wanted the security of having a strong support system as they moved into adulthood. A potentially problematic finding was that many of the youth had unrealistic expectations regarding reuniting with their birth families. The authors acknowledged that although birth families could be a source of support, there can also be dysfunction and/or rejection that can impede the transitional process. Case workers felt so strongly about this that they recommended youth be re-introduced to their birth families prior to discharge, so that if the reunification is not successful, there is time to develop a backup plan

for mentoring or other adult support. Some workers further recommended that there be no contact with the birth family until they are re-evaluated by professionals and the child safety and caretaking concerns are addressed.

- (4) *Normalizing the foster care experience*: Findings suggest that foster children are often viewed more harshly than their peers. The study indicated that “professionals over-pathologize or overreact to typical teenage transgressions and experiences” (pg. 1095), thus branding the youth as having behavioral problems.
- (5) *Independent Living Programs*: These programs offer traditional classroom activities and were viewed by the participants of this study as having little or no relevance to real life experiences; however, participants acknowledged that these programs were better than nothing.
- (6) *Issues related to disability*: Youth with physical and emotional disabilities face additional concerns both while in placement and during transition due to lack of professional training, accommodations, and informational resources.

In summary, the findings from this study support the need for additional financial and human resources in the child welfare system, continuous education and training for foster parents and potential care givers, early youth intervention programs, effective cross system collaboration, formalized mentoring programs, educational partnerships, student-centered career planning and placement, basic life skills development, and self advocacy and empowerment of youth in transition.

Contributing to the growing body of resilience research, Osterling and Hines (2006) conducted an exploratory study using qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate a mentoring program designed to assist youth in acquiring life skills for successful emancipation from foster care into independent living. The effects of mentoring at-risk youth have been well documented and suggest that its positive effects include improved self-esteem; successful educational outcomes; decreases in at-risk behaviors such as promiscuity, substance abuse, and violence; and improved

interpersonal relationships (Clayden and Stein, 2005; Grossman and Tierney, 1998; and Rhodes, J.E., 2002). However, other researchers such as DuBois, D.L. et al. (2002) were not as optimistic, noting that mentoring programs may not significantly impact the outcomes of at-risk youth.

The youth in the Osterling and Hines study (2006) stated that mentoring was helpful in assisting with independent living skills, such as financial planning, completing their education, finding employment, and teaching them how to take responsibility for themselves by using their own brains and instincts. Challenges were also reported by both the youth and mentors, which echo previous studies, including lack of coordination of services, limited resources, and ineffective communication with child welfare professionals. In conclusion, the results of this study reveal that mentoring can be effective if (1) a strong relationship between the mentor and youth is established as early as possible (suggesting that waiting until the youth reaches the age of transition, usually 18, is not beneficial); (2) integration of mentoring programs and Independent Living Programs (ILP's) improve the chances for success; and (3) collaboration and coordination of services and support for mentors increase positive transitional outcomes.

Sobel and Healy (2001) focused on the role of the foster parent in developing resiliency in foster care youth. They noted that foster parents can help build hope, faith, and trust, as well as encourage youth to identify their needs, think critically, and positively handle challenges of life. Managing these issues effectively strengthens the resilience of youth on their journey to adulthood.

Michigan Findings

According to a report compiled by the Michigan Department of Human Services in 2005, nearly one of every 100 children in Michigan were in out-of-home care because of child abuse and neglect or delinquency, including one of every 50 African-American children. Approximately 14 percent of Wayne County youths are in out-of-home care—almost double the placement rate for other children in the state. Each year, over one-quarter of the children entering out-of-home care are youths 14 years of age or older, and most are unlikely to be adopted if parental rights are terminated. Only 14 percent of the 2,843 foster

youths who were adopted in 2005 were over the age of 13 (MDHS, 2006).

Similar to findings of the national studies cited above, young people who age out of foster care in Michigan are at high risk. As many as half are high school dropouts; most have been unemployed at least half of their time out of care and had experienced periods of homelessness; nearly half had been forced to rely on public assistance; more than one-third had children of their own, further limiting their job prospects; and too many had been arrested (MDHS, 2006).

Michigan lacks a coordinated strategy for ensuring that at-risk youth receive the supports they need to move into adulthood. Services that address the needs of young people are scattered throughout the major State departments, are generally not coordinated, and have not traditionally been a high priority.

Michigan's Children, a statewide, private nonprofit advocacy organization located in Lansing, Michigan, was successful in spearheading the legislative efforts mandating that the state more comprehensively address the needs of youth transitioning out of foster care. Through this mandate, the Michigan Department of Human Services was required to convene an inter-departmental task force on services to at-risk youth transitioning out of foster care and into adulthood in the FY 2006 budget cycle. This task force included wide representation from public and private agencies, including youth who were aging out of foster care, the departments of Human Services, Labor and Economic Growth, Education, Community Health, the Michigan State Housing Authority, State foundations, United Way, tribal councils, K-12 education, community colleges, Community Mental Health, youth advocacy groups, and private foster care placement agencies.

Barriers to a successful transition were identified in the areas of permanency, education, housing, employment, and physical and mental health. To eliminate these barriers, the task force agreed on the need to implement 21 initiatives. These recommendations were received and approved by the legislature in September 2006. The initiatives included:

1. The Department of Human Services (DHS) will create a youth-friendly website that will link to existing services and resources that could be accessed by youths, caseworkers, birth and foster parents, teachers, and others. This website will have information from

- all services areas and should provide links to other sources of information.
2. The Department of Labor and Economic Growth (DLEG) will apply for a federal waiver under the Workforce Investment Act which would allow them to automatically refer foster youths to Michigan Works! Agencies at the age of 14 to develop job skills and educational planning that will lead to career opportunities that maximize the youths' potential.
 3. The Wayne County Department of Human Services piloted Summer Training and Enrichment Program (STEP) will be expanded into out-state counties (any Michigan county outside of Wayne).
 4. The Department of Community Health (DCH) will amend the state Medicaid Plan to ensure that all foster youths receive continued and seamless Medicaid eligibility until the age of 21.
 5. Expand the Healthy Kids Dental Model to include coverage for the population from birth to age 21.
 6. The DCH, in collaboration with county level public health departments, will work to make educating this population of youth a priority in an effort to improve health through the reduction of risky behaviors and lifestyles.
 7. The DCH and the DHS will develop a model for joint purchasing of mental health services that will meet the needs of foster youths and those transitioning into adulthood.
 8. Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA), in collaboration with the DHS, will hold regular, regionally based workshops on how to access safe and affordable housing.
 9. The MSHDA will allocate funding under the Homeless Youth Initiative to provide rental assistance to homeless foster youth across the state.
 10. The Detroit area Housing Resource Center will administer a pilot program that will provide information and referral services to former foster youths in the Detroit area.
 11. The Department of Education (DOE) will expand the Student Advocacy Center model statewide to ensure that youth are provided with individual education planning and persist to high school graduation.
 12. The DOE will implement a longitudinal tracking system, or "Single Record Student Database" that will allow students to be tracked from district to district and on into post-secondary education. This will ensure that students will have access to a complete and accurate record of their academic activity.
 13. The DOE will work to implement the Guardian Scholars model for all foster care youth who are interested in pursuing post-secondary education opportunities.
 14. The DHS will assign education planners to youth who are interested in pursuing post-secondary education, and will work to increase the flexibility of current post-secondary education funding options through the implementation of tuition waivers and housing stipends.
 15. The DHS will automatically enroll all foster care youth who meet eligibility criteria into the Michigan Tuition Incentive Program (TIP).
 16. The DHS will work to ensure that all foster youth have a permanent connection with at least one caring adult before they leave care.
 17. The DHS will revise current contracts with private agencies providing adoption services to include performance outcomes that demonstrate increases in the adoptions of older youth. Statutory changes will also be sought to allow for permanent, subsidized guardianships for youths whose parental rights have been terminated.
 18. The DHS will extend foster care beyond the age of 18 to all youth who consent.
 19. The DHS will provide all youth with access to their critical documents, including cop-

ies of their birth certificates, Social Security cards, and government-issued photo ID cards.

20. The DHS will assist youth with enrollment in driver's education courses and give them access to free and reduced-cost older cars from the State fleet so that they can fulfill the required number of practice driving hours.
21. The DHS will expand the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative statewide by 2010.

In October 2006, Michigan's Children convened a KidSpeak[®] program in the chambers of the Detroit City Council. KidSpeak is a youth public forum 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. The responses from the young people and policymakers were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Recommendations from the young people (N=20) on how to improve outcomes for youth aging out of foster care encapsulated the following major themes: (1) the need to be informed about what was going on within their case plan; (2) the need to ensure that youth have stability before their foster care cases are closed; (3) the need to be informed about available services for which they may be eligible; (4) the need for supportive services for parenting teens; and (5) the need for at least one stable, caring adult in their lives.

"...I went to several foster homes, as many children do. I believe that success begins when you have information from the correct source. Many children in the foster care system don't get the information that they need to begin and start off in life...after leaving [residential placement] I hit a downfall because I had been in residential care for so long, and then at the age of 18 you're on your own and what do you do...a lot of kids give up; they don't have the resources that they need when they leave. They don't have that support."

"I left the system with no health insurance, no GED, and no driver's license, and all my SIL

[semi-independent living] checks were cut off... Before a case is closed out, please make sure that youth have stable housing and a minimal education such as a GED and at least a car permit if not a driver's license, some type of money coming through or a job, and please make sure that youth know about educational training vouchers and youth in transition funds...have health insurance and at least one mental health evaluation and some type of booklet that tells a youth about programs that offers services to youth... Kids in foster care don't have parents, and they need a lot of things like any kid would."

"I received my GED in December of 2003. A lot of youth have issues with the aging out process due to not enough resources or things of that nature. Foster care youth are not bad kids. You have some youth that really go on to become people with good outcomes in society. When you have youths in foster care, it's good to allow those kids the resources to be able to become productive members of society. As far as employment, it's hard to keep a job when you don't have a good support system. When you have negative people around you, it makes it harder for you...I think youth in the system who are getting ready to age out—they should have some type of housing voucher or incentive to help them because a lot of youth are homeless when they get ready to age out due to many situations. I'm going through that right now..."

"I got pregnant when I was 15 years old, and I dropped out of school. I didn't have anywhere to go, so I went from foster home to foster home and to different types of programs. They [the State] should have more teen support. They should have jobs set up for youth entering the system...They should have a placement for mothers and their children...I think there should be more mentoring programs and more resources for people...If they [the youth] don't know [about resources] then they can't get the help they need."

"I want to talk about the importance of having a mentor or a supportive adult in your life. I

came into the foster care [system] when I was about 14 or 15 years of age. I went to stay with relatives and think throughout the whole ordeal, that helped me out the most...I had supportive adults in my life. My middle school principal was very supportive of me. The principal would look after me like a mother or grandmother would. There needs to be more effort put into developing mentoring programs for youth 18 years of age and older because current programs don't service that age range...It's very important that us older adults have that mentoring support...We need that continuation of support so that we can have a better future and a better outlook on life."

Policymakers in attendance at the KidSpeak event included federal Congresswoman Carolyn C. Kilpatrick; Senator Hansen Clarke; Representative Marsha Cheeks; and Representative Mary Waters. Also in attendance were newly elected officials including Shenetta Coleman and Coleman Young, Jr.; Detroit City Councilwoman Monica Conyers; Chief Judge Mary Beth Kelly, 3rd Circuit Court; Dr. Marlene Davis, superintendent, Wayne County Regional Educational Service Agency; Denise Glover, trustee, Wayne County Community College; and Mr. Jerome Rutland, director, Wayne County Department of Human Services, among several others. In reaction to the youths' testimony, the following statements were made by policymakers in attendance (N=19):

"I've seen many of you because you are court ordered, and I've also seen you because I handle the AWOLP (absent without legal permission) docket, which is a docket of young persons who have truanted from their court ordered placements. This is an issue: placements don't provide the support systems, the very words you have used to young people...From the court's perspective, we are working in conjunction with the Department of Human Services...the way that we approach the young people and the way that we order placements, and we want to ensure that the placements in which the young person is meets the needs of the young person...not the needs of the agency and not the needs of the foster parents because they are too long...Our court is working very, very hard

with DHS and with the Department of Community Mental Health to really change the way that foster care youths are treated in our state."

"We are tremendously aware that in the past, the court hasn't reached out enough to this population. Too often, wardship was terminated at the age of 18. The issue now is how can we best serve these persons from age 18 to 21. Why are we terminating wardship at the age of 18 when we don't have to? What we are looking at is extending wardship and ensuring that these wonderful youth in transition programs in the state are really reaching out to you."

To keep the momentum and discussion going, Michigan's Children planned a second event, the Youth in Transition Forum, in conjunction with Wayne County Community College District, in November 2006. Over 200 policymakers, youth, agency professionals, and concerned public citizens attended the forum. Discussion at the forum centered around one central theme: *The need for better collaboration, information, and resource sharing*. The importance of many services to the lives of at-risk youth cannot be underestimated. But many young people fall through the gaps when support is not available in the place or at the time that it is needed. We must learn more from them and from those in agencies and the community who know, and have learned from experience, about the challenges youth face. We need to know not only about the gaps, but also what works well. We need to know what matters about the way services are organized and how they relate to each other. One of the key issues of the day was wide recognition that there is no room for agencies to "go it alone" if youth are to have access to all the supports and services to which they are entitled.

In particular, lack of access to mental health services was frequently mentioned in a number of settings. For example, in foster care, many youth do not get assessed for the services they need.

"DHS and CMH/mental health services need to work together more to make sure youth are evaluated so they can get the mental health services."

Collaboration, information, and resource-sharing is essential. One agency representative remarked:

"What are the agencies providing to each other? Agencies need to quit focusing on their own

agency and collaborate so all agencies can advise kids on the best place to go.”

Making sure that youth have access to all possible options means that information and access to all resources should be more freely shared.

“There must be more resource sharing between agencies. Agencies should build their resource base so that all agencies can work together with the most access to programs/services possible.”

Although the voices of young people were apparent throughout the day, concern was expressed that child welfare workers and others were either poorly trained, under-resourced, or just not taking the needs of young people seriously enough to act quickly. This shocking comment made by a young person highlights the importance of responding and being respectful.

“I think the communication piece is a big piece. I sat in a shelter for six months and did not meet my worker till the seventh month. There was no communication there. They are a big piece, very important to my life, so the communication is very important.”

To further explore Michigan’s progress on improving outcomes for youth in transition, a second forum entitled “Youth Voices Changing Public Policy” is being planned at Wayne County Community College for September 17, 2007, that will build on the advocacy efforts of the State Interdepartmental Task Force, KidSpeak®, and the first Youth in Transition Forum. This forum aims to contribute to a process of change that will bring together the voices of young people, those active in the field, and those in the community who care and are committed to improving the lives of all youth, especially those youth that are transitioning to adulthood without a high school diploma or GED and are not employed.

Conclusion

Services for youth who transition out of foster care are woefully inadequate in addressing basic needs. Those needs include, but are not limited to, education, housing, access to health services, and basic job skills. The State of Michigan is to be applauded for the efforts it has made to improve outcomes for this population. Most states do not have a coordinated

strategy in place to address these needs, nor has much attention been paid to ensuring that youth successfully transition to adulthood. This process was started by stakeholders of the system—foster children, the Department of Human Services, and the court system, as well as private child welfare agencies and youth advocacy organizations. Some of the highlights include extending Medicaid eligibility until the age of 21, providing rental assistance to homeless foster children, expanding job training programs, and improving access to post-secondary education funding. ©

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