

voice

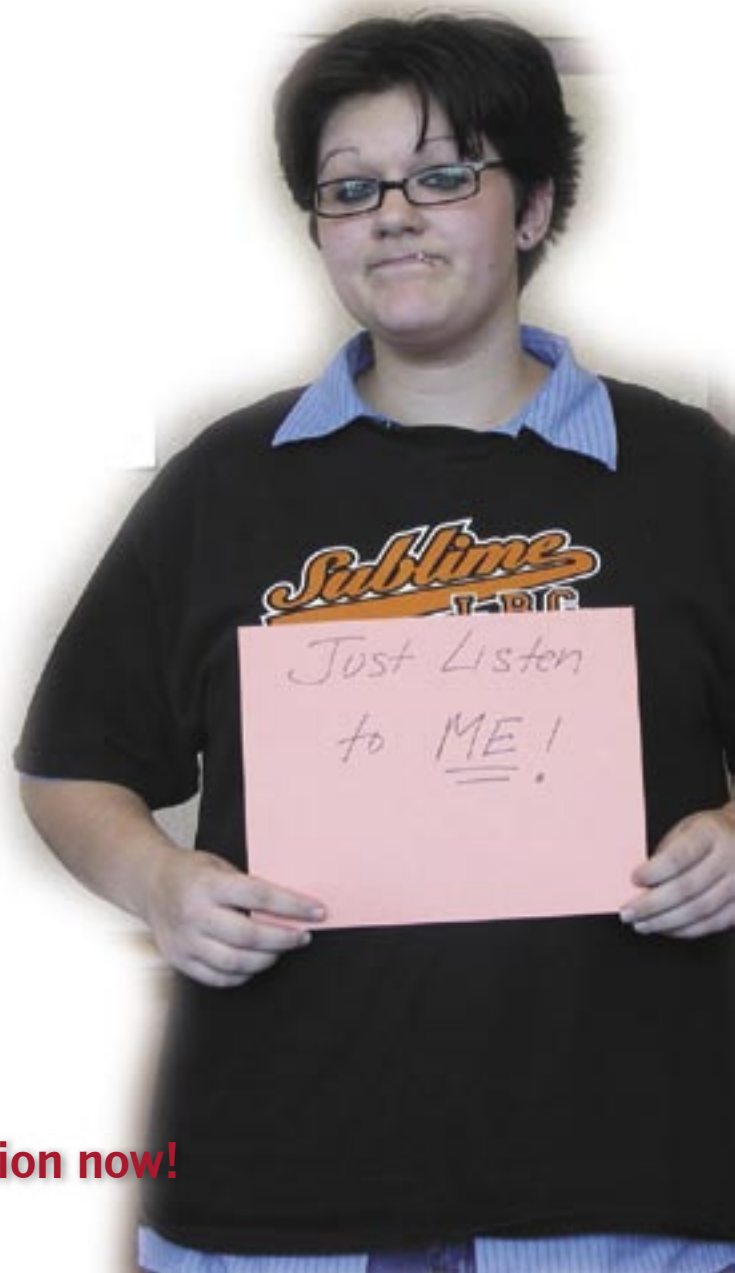
discussing issues and concerns of michigan foster youth

Today, more than half a million children in America live in foster care. This year alone, 20,000 of us will “age out” of foster care, typically at age 18.

In Michigan 1,600 youth age out every year. For years, if not our entire lifetimes, our “parents” have been state or county foster care agencies, and now, overnight, we are on our own. We are disproportionately youth of color. Though most 18 year-old youth coming from intact families can expect emotional and financial support for years to come, once we turn 18, the state is no longer legally obligated to provide any assistance, and often does not.

Although you, as the state, have taken custody and become our parents somehow you have come to accept the “myth” that our independence begins at age 18.

Consequently, many of us aging out of foster care struggle to become self-sufficient. But it does not have to be this way. Communities and policymakers have it in their power to improve conditions for us. Although we have tremendous resiliency and optimism, our outcomes are better when supports and opportunities are tailored to our specific needs.



We're no different! Stop discrimination now!

data from several studies paint a distressing picture.

four years after leaving foster care:

•• Fewer than half of emancipated foster youth have graduated from high school, compared with 85 % of all 18- to 24-year-olds. •• Fewer than one in eight of us has graduated from a four-year college. •• One-fourth have endured some period of homelessness. •• Almost two-thirds of us have not maintained employment for a year. •• Fewer than one in five is completely self-supporting. •• More than a quarter of males have spent time in jail. •• Four out of ten of us have become parents.

fifteen statements from the youth board

1

Foster youth should be part of the decision making process every time there is a change in placement.

We are moved so many times that it is difficult to keep any relationship with our friends or family. Often our moves are without any warning to us and we can't understand why. Sometimes the move is so fast we can't even say goodbye to our friends. We change schools so many times that we often can't graduate on time.

- We should be included in every decision made about us. Nothing about us without us!
- Make sure we are present at every court hearing and agency meeting.
- Caseworkers and foster parents need to be

Who's the expert? Adult or kid?

trained about the special needs of teenagers. We think this would encourage them to work through some of the problems we may have with a placement. Sometimes our behavior is just typical teenager.

- This should be in the state's Program Improvement Plan (PIP).
- We need an advocate with us at the decision making meetings. Often having a peer advocate is as important as anything else.
- We are so accustomed to not being heard that many of us have stopped trying. We need to know that you are really going to listen!
- Be clear with the ground rules. Everyone gets their say but it doesn't necessarily mean everyone gets their way.
- Please expand Family to Family across the state. This builds a relationship with the worker and youth, teaches responsibility and reduces acting out and AWOL.
- Many of us love our birth parents very much and we wish the state put as much effort into saving our families as they do into removing and placing us in care.

2

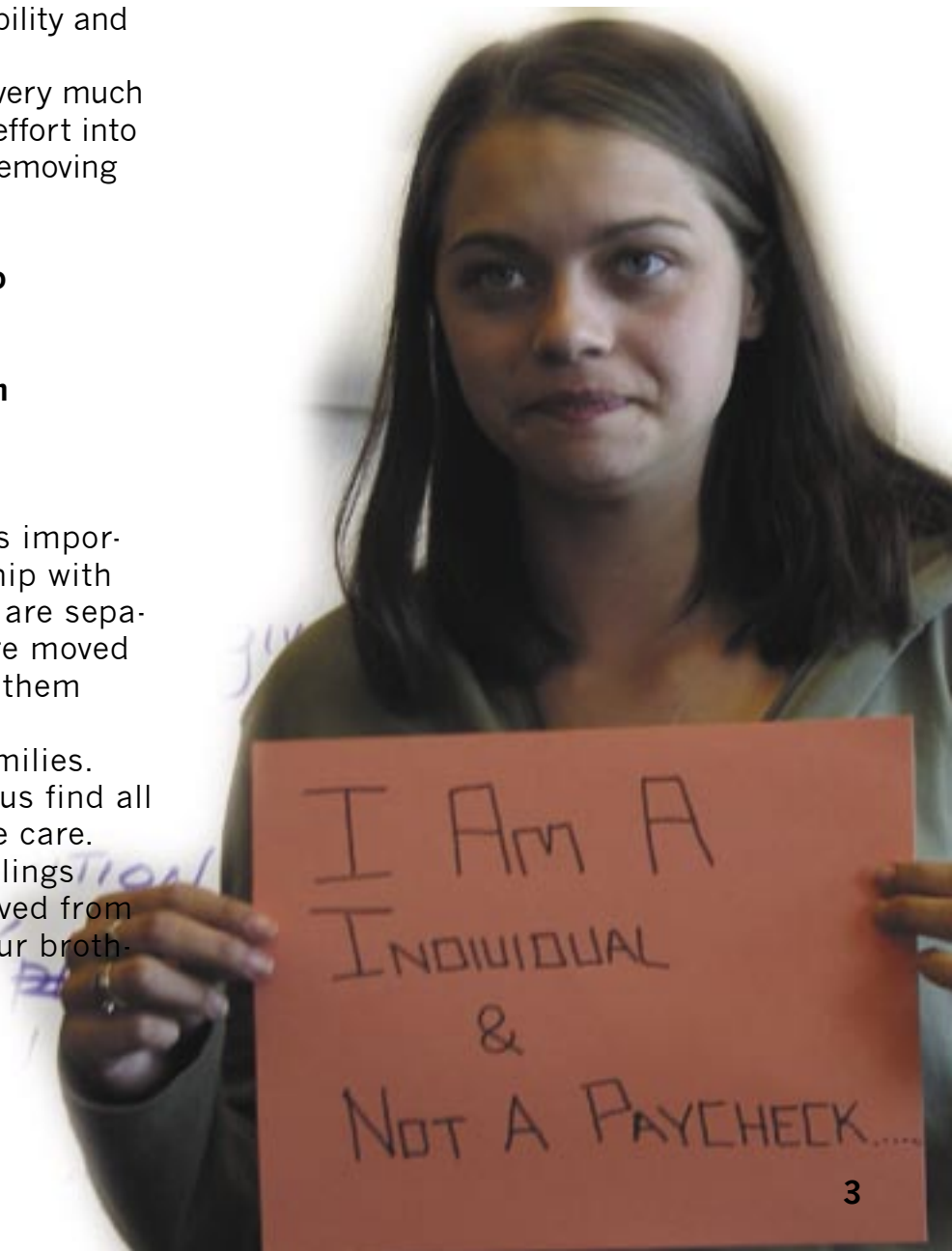
The state should develop strategies that help foster youth maintain positive connections with their birth families and hometown friends.

For many of us, though not all, it's important to maintain a close relationship with our birth parents. So many of us are separated from our siblings, and we are moved so many times, that we can't find them even after we leave care.

- Don't limit phone calls to our families.
- Make it policy that you will help us find all our family members once we leave care.
- Make it a priority to place all siblings together. We have just been removed from our parents, don't make us lose our brothers and sisters too.

The kid is!

There should be a special person available to help foster children receive birth certificates (certified), Social Security cards and other important information!



- Recruit foster parents in the neighborhoods we live in so that we don't have to leave all our hometown friends and schools when we are removed from our families.

3 **The state should provide support that will connect every foster youth age 14 or older with a mentor or other caring adult in their lives.**

Many of the problems we face when we leave care could be helped if we had a caring adult in our lives who will stand by us, mentor us, and give us advice when we ask for it.

- Collaborate with all current mentor programs in the state to increase emphasis on foster youth.
- Place greater emphasis on nurturing the

relations we already have with caring adults.

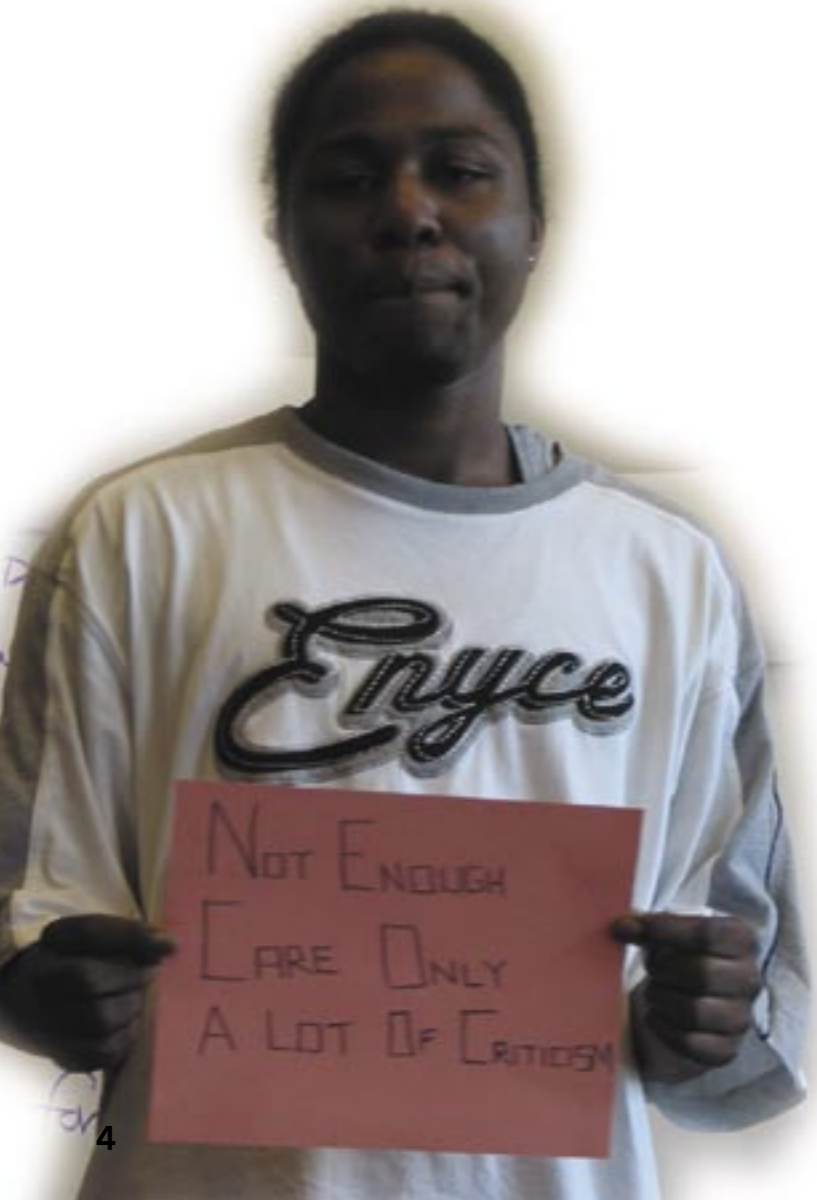
- Let us decide who we want to have a relationship with. Some of us don't want "mentors."

- Get commitments from corporations and other businesses to help mentor us through employment. Help us with your network like you help your own children.

4 **Foster youth should always receive an allowance for their own personal use.**

Although state policy is that foster youth should receive an allowance, the money goes to the foster parent and sometimes doesn't make it to us. It's important that we learn how to handle money, how to budget, and how to open a bank account.

- Write checks directly to us, or deposit the money in our bank accounts. The norm should be to give the money to us to handle, not dole it out as the foster parent sees fit.
- Make sure foster parents know it's policy that we receive the allowance for our personal use. Some foster parents require us to use the allowance to buy normal personal hygiene items like toothpaste and shampoos.
- Make sure that all children and youth in care know we are supposed to be receiving an allowance. We need more information as we come into care.
- Allowance is too often withheld as punishment. This should be limited and only used when absolutely necessary.
- The allowance should be increased as the cost of living goes up.



Listen more!

- When we are in residential or relative placement we don't receive an allowance. This isn't fair!
- Hold the caseworker responsible for making sure this policy is carried out.

5 The state should develop a savings account for each youth in care over age 14, and contribute to the account for each year the youth is in care.

When we leave care at age 18 we usually don't have any assets and often don't have any steady employment. Although Youth in Transition can provide for some of our needs (but only for youth who are eligible) this just barely helps us get by. We need help building assets to get ahead.

- The state should open a matched savings account, called an Individual Development Account (IDA), for each foster youth and deposit money in the account for every year the youth is in care.
- All youth in care should be eligible, regardless of our placement type, including those of us in relative placement.
- Youth in Transition funds should be used for this purpose, and the state could create a check-off on income tax returns to solicit more donations.
- Someone will need to monitor how we spend the money and it should only be used for certain allowable purposes.
- Please provide us with financial literacy training and a caring adult who will encourage us to save and spend wisely.
- We need transportation to banks that hold our accounts.
- Set the accounts up like state employees.

I would like to see the state do extensive background checks (like they do for day care providers) before they give licenses to foster parents.



And act on recommendations for positive change.

6

The state should make it possible for every foster youth to get a driver's license.

Many of us aren't able to get a driver's license. We need a certified copy of our birth certificates to get any kind of state ID. Foster parents often won't help us get the practice driving a license requires. We can't get transportation to driver's training classes. Foster parents often won't allow us to have a license because it might increase the cost of their car insurance.

- The state should hire someone to take us for our practice driving.
- We should be allowed to use state cars for practice.
- YIT funds should be used, consistently in each county, to help us get a driver's license and pay car insurance.
- Work with the Insurance Commissioner to address the high cost of car insurance for us; and with the Secretary of State's Department of Licensing to expand their service to go beyond the licensing road test.

7

Youth in care should have a certified copy of a birth certificate, social security card and state photo id. Youth 14 and older should have our own

personal copy as well as one in our file.

It's rare that a foster youth has a certified copy of his or her birth certificate or Social Security card. Think of that - especially after the Patriot Act we can't open bank accounts or get jobs without those.

- There is a simple process for workers to get certified copies of birth certificates (not

administrative copies) by filling out a form online and submitting it to the Department of Community Health. Make sure all workers know how to do it and will do it.

- Private agency workers can't do it - it must be DHS workers.
- Put it on the worker's checklist to make sure they get our important papers when we're removed. If our parents don't have them, the worker should apply for one immediately.
- It can take longer to get a certified birth certificate from another state - don't wait until it's needed. Get it right away.
- All youth 14 or older should have their own copy, as well as the one maintained in our files.

8

The state should recruit more foster homes for teens, with foster parents who like and understand teens.

Many foster parents think small children, small problems; teenagers, big problems. Please recruit and train more foster parents who love teenagers and understand our needs.

- We can and should help train foster parents.
- Our problems come in all shapes and sizes but we are usually not in care because of our problems - and it's not our fault we were removed from our homes!
- Change the culture by giving more positive messages about what great young people we are. We have so much potential - help us reach it.
- Teens can support foster parents and coach them. We know there are many good foster parents out there and we want to show them how much we appreciate them.

Some of us are in foster care because of our parents.

9

Youth panels should be included in all Foster parent training.

All foster parents, whether they take children or teenagers, should hear from us about our experiences in care. Our perspective is not the same as the adult perspective. What you think is happening to us, is not always reality.

- Hold trainings at the time of day that we can attend without missing school or work.
- Weed out those bull-headed people who think that because they're adults they know more than we do.
- Use those of us who are currently trained in Jim Casey leadership skills. Train other youth to increase the pool of leaders.
- Create a "Voices of Youth" video for training foster parents and workers.
- Although you may think you can speak for us, our voices are much more powerful.
- Just do it!

10

Foster youth should be entitled to transportation to after school events and social gatherings.

We're just like your kids. We want to be able to attend foot-

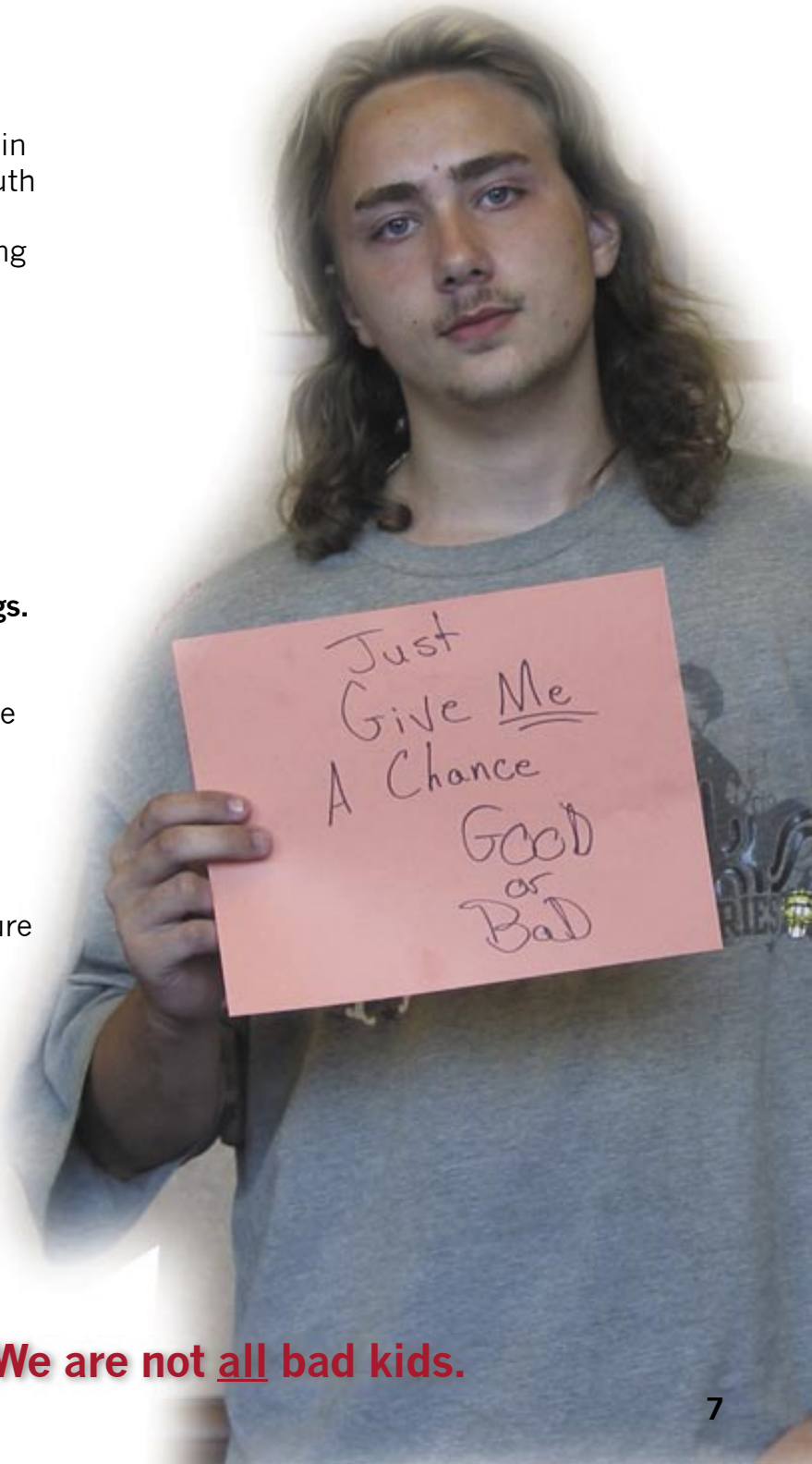
ball games, school dances, after-school clubs and other events.

We need them so we can make friends, and keep friends.

These are healthy activities, please make sure we can be there.

- Make sure foster parents understand that part of their stipend includes transportation fees.

- We understand that foster parents are often caring for more than one child, but so are most of you. The average parent has several children and manages to juggle all their transportation needs at the same time.
- If necessary recruit volunteer transporters.
- We are already so isolated. Please help us feel a part of things.



Don't stereotype foster kids. We are not all bad kids.

11

Foster youth should be allowed, and supported, to attend the religious services of their own choice.

As elementary as this seems, it doesn't always happen. Foster parents give many reasons but sometimes it boils down to bias.

- Make sure we have transportation to attend our religious services.
- Make sure the foster parent knows they can't force us to attend theirs.
- Make sure the foster parent knows we don't have to attend any religious service. They often make us attend whether we want to or not.
- This is state policy - enforce it!

12

All foster youth should be entitled to free tuition at any state college or community college.

We know this is a funding issue, but we will never reach our full potential without post-secondary education or training. We need help to prepare for college or training, and to believe we can succeed.

- Collaborate with Department of Education and the legislature to get free tuition at community colleges.
- Increase the financial aid funds available for all foster youth.
- Fully use the Chafee Education and Training Vouchers.
- Federal legislation is pending. We want to work with the legislature to enact state law.
- Include a check-off on income tax returns to raise money.
- Require state-funded institutions to take foster youth who qualify and maintain a 2.0 grade point average
- Make the financial aid officer responsible for finding all resources, and make the college responsible for making up the difference.
- California and Texas already have policies. Look to them for models.



Fix the system!

13

Foster youth should have priority for free or low cost items (cars, computers, etc.) At state auctions.

Every year the state sells off surplus computers, cars and other items at auction. These should be given, or at least offered at reduced cost, to foster youth.

- This will require state law.
- We want to work with the Department of Management and Budget to change the law and practice to allow it.
- At least we'll know we won't be getting a lemon when we buy a car.

14

Every effort should be made to ensure that foster youth enter the system through child welfare, if appropriate, instead of juvenile justice.

So many of us are in care because of "acting out." Many, many of us are "acting out" because we have been abused. But if we are in the juvenile justice system we aren't eligible for many of the supports available to youth in child welfare.

- Judges should be trained to know the consequence of keeping us in the juvenile justice system, when the reason we get in trouble in the first place is that we have been abused or neglected.
- DHS and judges should always investigate delinquency cases and open a dual case if appropriate to make sure the abuse or neglect is recognized, and that we are eligible for Youth in Transition and many other services.

15

Foster youth should be eligible for medicaid until our 21st birthday. We should be given the option of remaining in state care until 21,

instead of being dropped at 18.

We have had so much disruption in our lives that we need at least the same supports other youth receive from their families. Studies show that foster youth who are given the option to continue living with foster parents or in independent living while working or attending school, until age 21 instead of 18, show dramatically improved outcomes.

- Health care is a basic need, especially for those of us who have been in the foster care system. Many of us need mental health services after we leave care. Some of the issues we are trying to deal with have been caused by the system, not necessarily by our birth families.
- . Because we have no family we can't stay on our parents' health insurance, even if we're in college. DHS should investigate the availability of federal matching dollars that could offset the cost to the state of extending Medicaid.
- We are important and our needs are important. Sometimes our problems can overwhelm us as individuals, but our numbers aren't so great that helping us will overwhelm the state budget. Please consider us as individuals and look for ways to help.
- We are survivors, and we want a hand up, not a hand out.


We need help. Please don't procrastinate.



I will not fall through the cracks, you can't hold me back. I am going to survive and live well.

the youth board

These youth represent their colleagues from the following counties: 🐾Ant-
rim, 🐾Arenac, 🐾Bay, 🐾Benzie,
🐾Charlevoix, 🐾Emmet, 🐾Grand
Traverse, 🐾Kalkaska, 🐾Leela-
nau, 🐾Livingston, 🐾Macomb,
🐾Manistee, 🐾Missaukee, 🐾Sagi-
naw, 🐾Washtenaw, 🐾Wayne and
🐾Wexford.

A photograph of three young people standing in a room. On the left is a young woman with long blonde hair, wearing a black V-neck top and light blue jeans. In the center is a young man with dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt with the word 'Eryce' written on it. On the right is a young woman with short dark hair and glasses, wearing a black t-shirt with a red and white logo that says 'Red Wings' and 'L.B.C.' below it. They are standing on a red carpet with a patterned rug in the foreground. A wooden chair is visible in the background.

I don't care what it takes. I will help one another on my way through life. I survive only when "we" survive.

support for the youth board

✦ In a recent landmark study, researchers from Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, interviewing former foster youth aged 17-18, and then again at 19, found that some of the young adults interviewed were in stable situations and moving forward with their education or employed in promising jobs. However, nearly a third of young adults in the study were neither working nor in school – a figure that was more than twice that of a comparable group of peers their age. ✦ Remaining in care after the age of 18 increased the likelihood that the young adults would continue their education or be employed.

— Adapted from a press release, Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago

I have found my personal experience with the program to be enlightening. I had no idea of the problems faced by these children when aging out of the system. The experience with the IDA accounts the bank is providing should be the absolute minimum level of financial training a person should take into adulthood. .

—Sid Van Slyke
Fifth Third Bank



JCYOI positively impacts a segment of the youth population that in many cases is forgotten at a very important time of transition. It is wonderful to see a preventative program that is effective and empowers youth to utilize the assets of their community.

— Mike Kelso

Cadillac Area YMCA

Proverbs 20:18 says “Make plans by seeking advice.” This is why the youth boards are so important. The boards provide a way for youth to voice their needs and concerns. It is essential for youth to participate in advising the system about what they need to be successful in their lives. The youth boards are a way to make all of this possible.

— Khadija Walker-Fobbs

Fobbs and Walker Consulting

The youth we have worked with are totally amazing. they are strong, resilient and creative. it is so important that those of us who are involved with the youth respect their dreams and work

together to help them realize those dreams.

— Kelly Ruffing,

Wayne County Project Team

I am a community partner because I want to do all I can to ensure that the youth have the resources and support they need to be successful , happy and proud young adults

— Professor Jan Findlater,

Wayne State Law School

As foster youth try to build a future with little or no adult support, the lifeline provided by the Jim Casey initiative is crucial. Without it, these youth - who have spent part of their childhood as “clients” - may be doomed to a lifetime with that label in a succession of social service programs and far too often with the label “homeless” or “prisoner.”

— Becky Beauchamp,

United Way of NW Michigan

what is being done?

In 2003, the Department of Human Services received a grant from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (JCYOI). Of the twelve JCYOI grantees in the country, Michigan's is the only grant awarded to a public child welfare agency. JCYOI is looking to Michigan as a model for the country of how public will and policy can be influenced by the voices of youth.

about the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative™

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative™ is a national foundation whose mission is to help youth in foster care make successful transitions to adulthood. The Initiative makes grants to support bringing together the people and resources needed to help youth make the connections they need to education, employment, health care, housing, and supportive personal and community relationships.

Launched in June 2001, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative was informed by two of the leading foundations focused exclusively on child and youth well being: The Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs.

Opportunity Passport™

The Opportunity Passport™ is the centerpiece of the Initiative's work. Recognizing that it takes income to "get by", but it takes assets to "get ahead", it is a tool designed to organize resources to create opportunities – financial, educational, vocational, health care, entrepreneurial, and recreational opportunities – for young people leaving care.

The goals of the Opportunity Passport™ are to help youth leaving foster care become financially literate; gain experience with the banking system; amass assets for education, housing, health care, automobile, and a few other specified expenses; and gain streamlined entry to educational, training, and vocational opportunities.

three distinct components:

- A personal bank account, to be used to pay for short-term expenses;
- A matched savings account, also known as an Individual Development Account (IDA), to be used for asset building.
- Door openers, a host of opportunities to be developed on a local basis. Door openers may include pre-approval for registration for community college courses, expedited access to job-training or adult education courses, or smaller things like hair cuts, clothes for job interviews, music lessons and other things usually provided by parents .

Since November, 2003, Michigan has opened more than 300 foster youth Individual Development Accounts in 16 counties. More than \$35,000 has been matched by grant funds for allowable purposes and matched by grant funds 1:1.



Help me to become a better person for tomorrow.

County Youth Leadership Boards

As part of Michigan's support to us, we have formed 13 youth boards comprised of and led by us – youth in foster care or alumni of foster care, and supported by the JCYOI grant. We have been working in our counties and together across the state to raise awareness about the issues of older youth in care. We have met with and presented to our community leaders, state organizations, and at several national conferences. As a result, two of us have been chosen to be members of the National Foster Care Youth Advisory Council, one of us was invited to be a summer intern with Foster Club, Inc. in Oregon, and one of us was invited to testify before Congress. We have received both print and broadcast media coverage.

State Youth Policy Board

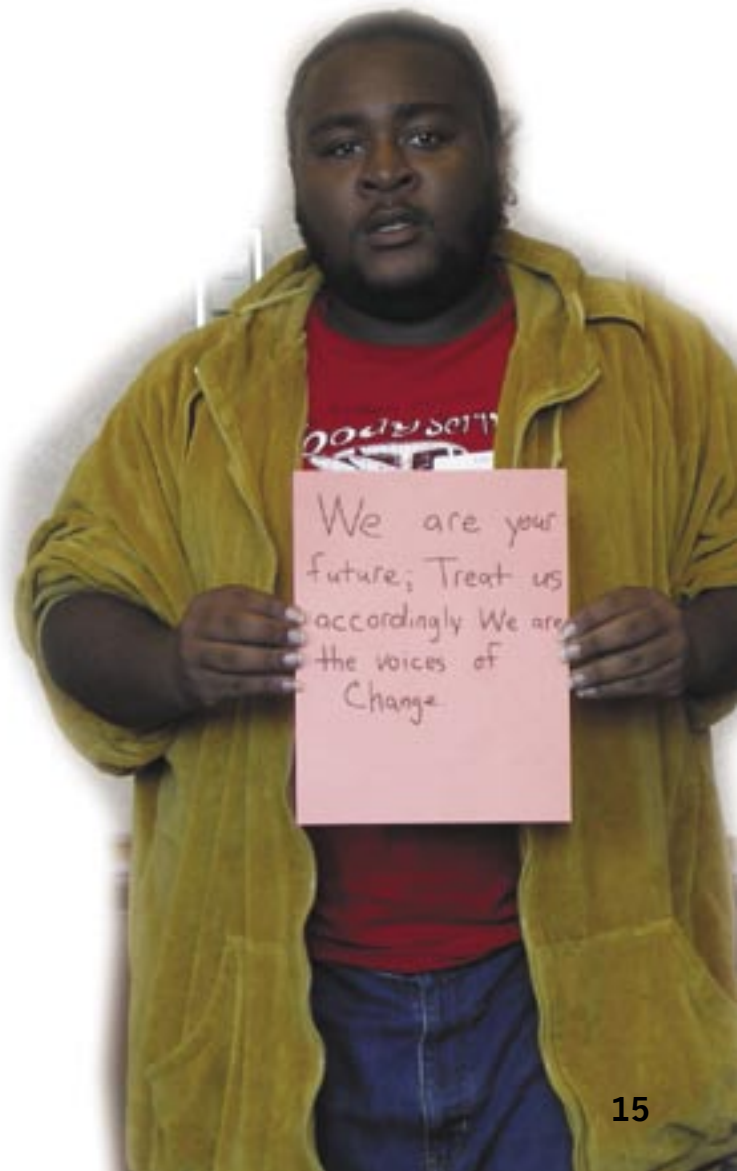
At the invitation of Marianne Udow, the Director of Human Services, our youth boards sent delegates to Lansing to begin work as a Youth Policy Board. Ms. Udow, will involve this Board in policy and practice that affect us and the thousands of other Michigan youth in care.

At our first Policy meeting youth from Antrim, Arenac, Bay, Benzie, Charlevoix, Emmet, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, Leelanau, Livingston, Macomb, Manistee, Missaukee, Saginaw, Washtenaw, Wayne, and Wexford counties decided on priority issues to raise to the Department of Human Services and the Legislature. This is our Action Agenda.

resources

An extensive set of resources for communities and stakeholders, including youth, policymakers, employers, and media, is available online and free-of-charge at the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative Web site, www.jimcaseyyouth.org Just click on the AGING OUT button.

Also, I would like to see foster parents taking classes on how to care for neglected/abused children. If these things happened, foster care would be a better experience for foster children.



Don't change who I am

“We should dream of and plan for a day

when fewer children require foster care. But until that day comes, we have a moral responsibility to prepare young people leaving foster care to become whole adults who can fulfill their potential and build bright and promising futures.”

—President Jimmy Carter, foreword, *On Their Own*, by Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler

key print resources

- Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler, *On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When they Leave Foster Care* (Westview Press, 2004)
- *Kids Count*, special issue devoted to youth in transition, The Annie E. Casey Foundation (Available at www.aecf.org)
- *Assessing the Effects of Foster Care: Early Results from the Casey National Alumni Study, 2004*, Casey Family Programs. (Available at www.casey.org)

resources for youth

www.FYI3.org – FYI3 stands for youth who are involved, informed and independent. It's a comprehensive, youth-oriented site with information, advice, and interactive features for young people leaving foster care. A useful glossary of foster care terms is available at <http://www.fyi.com/fyi3/informed/Glossary/index.cfm>.

www.YouthComm.org – Youth Communication is the publisher of *Represent*, a monthly magazine for youth in care, written and edited by youth. Each issue covers issues that youth in care deal with all the time like mental health, money woes, and navigating the foster care system.

www.MockingbirdSociety.org – The Mockingbird Society is an independent, non-profit organization that is dedicated to improving the safety, quality of life and future of the children and adolescents living in the foster care/group home system nationwide. They publish the newspaper *The Mockingbird Times*, which is written by youth in care.

[National Foster Youth Advisory Council](http://www.NationalFosterYouthAdvisoryCouncil.org) – The National Foster Youth Advisory Council (NFYAC) is a diverse national group of current and former foster youth and adult supporters from several states who have had direct experience with the child welfare systems. The council's purpose is to provide a voice for and make a difference in the lives of youth currently in care and support their successful transitions into adulthood.

key online resources:

www.jimcaseyyouth.org – Includes information on what you can do to help youth transitioning from care, as well as links to foster care and youth development.

www.casey.org – Casey Family Programs

www.chapinhall.uchicago.edu – Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago



Children- just love them!