

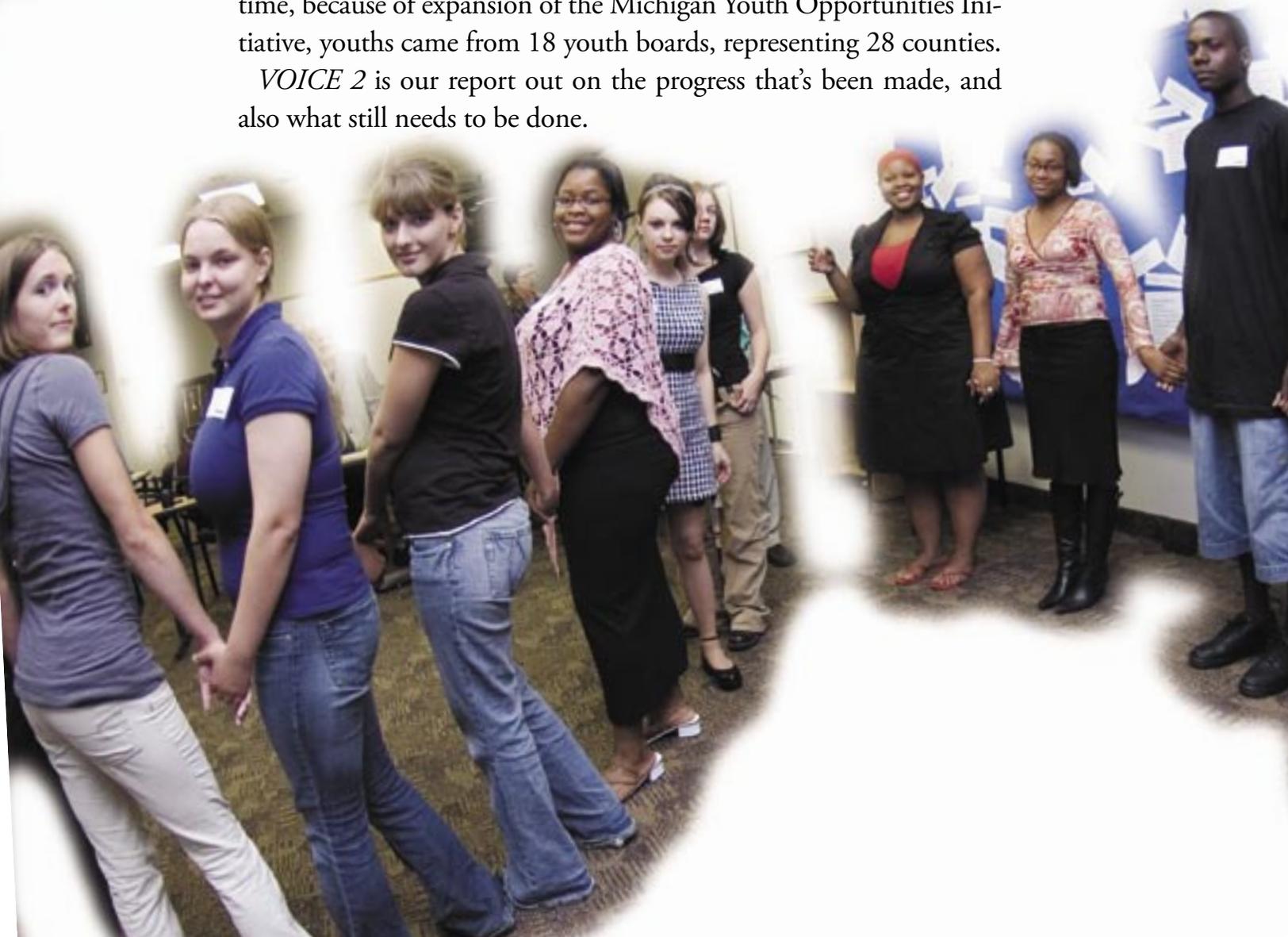
voice

Discussing Issues And Concerns Of Michigan Foster Youth

2

In 2005 representatives from Michigan's 16 local youth boards from 16 counties produced VOICE: discussing issues and concerns of Michigan's foster youth. Since then many people have been working to fix some of the issues we identified – so we met again in the summer of 2007. This time, because of expansion of the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative, youths came from 18 youth boards, representing 28 counties.

VOICE 2 is our report out on the progress that's been made, and also what still needs to be done.





our top 10 priorities

1. **Listen to us.**
2. **Don't break up families so fast.**
3. **We want to have a family.**
4. **We want to stay connected to our brothers and sisters.**
5. **We need safe, affordable housing when we leave care.**
6. **Residential placement should be a last resort not a first placement.**
7. **Help us succeed educationally. Make sure everyone leaves care with at least a High School Diploma or GED certified.**
8. **Help us get career counseling, access to counseling and life skill training.**
9. **Don't make decisions without us.**
10. **Treat us with respect.**

The two things we want more than anything else are to be listened to and to have a family. Too often we aren't given the opportunity to take part in decisions made about us while we are in care. Adults don't teach children to make wise choices in their adult lives if they don't allow them to participate in decisions that are being made about them as teens. "No decisions about us, without us."

Being ignored makes us feel insecure. So we close our mouths to feel secure, and to keep our dignity

SOME SOBERING STATISTICS

According to a study of former foster youths in three Midwestern states, conducted by the Chapin Hall Center for Children:

- ◆ **THOSE WHO LEFT FOSTER CARE AT 18** were nearly three times more likely than their peers to be out of work and school.
- ◆ **THEY WERE TWICE AS LIKELY TO BE UNABLE TO PAY THEIR RENT** and four times as likely to be evicted. About 14 percent had been homeless in the first two years after leaving care.
- ◆ **FEWER THAN HALF HAD BANK ACCOUNTS** – making them vulnerable to predatory lending practices and paycheck cashing shops.
- ◆ **THIRTY PERCENT OF THE MALES AND 11 PERCENT OF THE FEMALES HAD BEEN INCARCERATED** at least once after leaving care.



In most cases we want to stay connected with our birth family – parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, but especially our siblings. Even if it's not safe or possible for us to live with our families it's important that we be given the choice to maintain contact, or at least know about them – where they are and how they're doing. Far too often foster kids are separated from their siblings. More than anything else we want to be able to see our brothers and sisters – even if they have been adopted. It should be obvious to those adults with intact families that everyone needs to be nurtured and loved long after age 18.

Sometimes permanent relations can't be with our birth family, but that doesn't change our need.

At a recent Michigan higher education summit held shortly after the school shootings at Virginia Tech University, keynote speaker Debbie Staub from Casey Family Programs made a compelling observation. She said if her son had been a student at Virginia Tech she would have immediately gotten in her car and driven to the campus to take him home and give him all the emotional support a parent provides for her child in a traumatic situation like that. But who rushed to the school to comfort a foster youth with no family or home to go to? Schools provide that support for international students, but how about us?

In Michigan and elsewhere increasing awareness of the needs foster youth have for permanency in their lives has resulted in a commitment to make sure every foster youth is connected to at least one permanent loving adult before they leave the state's care. But unfortunately we haven't seen much evidence yet that has become practice.

Too often foster youth in Michigan and nationally face bleak outcomes. Although we are proud that many foster youth are incredibly resilient we often face an uphill battle to find and keep safe and stable housing, enroll in and stay in post-secondary education, find jobs with enough income to support a family, own a car or be close to public transportation to get to work and school, and have access to physical and mental health care.



I saw an ad
for foster parents
in the
"Help Wanted"
section.
They don't get much
money to support
all these kids,
but I don't
understand
why being a
foster parent
is a job.

Nationally, even though the number of children in foster care has decreased, the number who "age out" of the system has increased. In 2006, 525 Michigan youths aged out of foster care, compared to 481 in 2005.

Disturbingly, the Northwest Foster Alumni Study showed that the rates of post-traumatic stress syndrome among alumni of the foster care system were higher than among war veterans.

You can help improve the outcomes of all foster youths transitioning into adulthood and "aging out". Here are some suggestions:

- **Make sure that when we're in care we have a stable placement with a family.** Most foster youth do not need to be in residential facilities – if we're going to trust family relationships we need to be in a family.
- **Give us formal and informal preparation in life skills** like budgeting, credit, nutrition and cooking, making wise decisions about spending money, understanding the costs of owning a car, having safe dating relationships, getting and keeping a job, and finding and keeping an affordable apartment.
- **Don't let us leave care without a high school diploma or GED.** Make sure we have tutors if we need them.
- **Provide the financial assistance** and other supports we need to enroll in and succeed at college or training. This often means making sure we have year-round housing so we don't have to move out for holidays or summer when dorms close and we don't have a place to go.
- **Support our need to participate in clubs,** extra-curricular activities and youth organizations while in foster care.
- **Whatever it takes, don't let us be homeless** within a year of leaving care.
- **Make sure we have access to substance abuse treatment** and other mental health services. But don't over-medicate us with things we don't need just so we'll "behave better."
- **Let us stay in care until age 21 if we want to.** Many teenagers can't wait to leave their families at 18, but when they

figure out they aren't ready to make it in the real world they can go home again. Foster youth need that option too.

While there are challenges, there are positive things happening in Michigan. Those of us who attended the state youth board convening and participated in this report said over and over again that we know caseworkers are overloaded and foster parents have many competing demands on their time. Most of these adults have the best interests of foster kids at heart. We know that the state's budget is a mess and workers and foster parents are underpaid. But just because the money is short doesn't mean our needs go away. This is our attempt to not just say what the problems are, but also suggest some solutions.

progress on voice 1

In VOICE: discussing issues and concerns of Michigan foster youth, we presented fifteen issues that we want addressed by the Department of Human Services (DHS). This is some of the progress we've seen:

- *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.* We see some evidence that mentor programs are starting in counties, especially those that have Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative youth boards. Mentors are being recruited, trained and matched with youth. But it's not happening statewide and not fast enough. We want to choose someone who we can consider a mentor, not have one assigned to us. And we want the mentors to understand that we don't need any more people drifting in and out of our lives, making a promise that the relationship will last. Having a mentor is not the same as having a family. We give DHS an A for effort.

HARD NUMBERS

The results of a Michigan survey of 237 current or former foster youths aged 18-23 highlight the fact that most youth aren't ready to leave care at age 18. The youth, from Wayne county, Macomb county and 10 rural counties in Northwest Lower Michigan, were surveyed at the time they enrolled in the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative.

- ◆ 52 percent had no high school diploma or GED
- ◆ Only 34 percent were enrolled in post-secondary education
- ◆ Only 12 percent were employed full-time, and only 36 percent had even part-time employment
- ◆ 55 percent were on public assistance
- ◆ 44 percent reported they had nobody to support them in times of crisis
- ◆ 40 percent said they were either homeless or had no stable housing
- ◆ 61 percent had no driver's license
- ◆ 32 percent said they had no health insurance, even though almost all were eligible for Medicaid





My brother was adopted. What can I do to stay in his life?

- *The state should develop a savings account for each youth in care over age 14.* Thanks to the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative almost 600 youths in 28 counties have individual development accounts that the state will match every time we make a purchase for education, employment, health care, housing or transportation. Lots of us have used the account to buy a car or go to school, and believe it or not some of us have even used it to buy a house or start a small business. This is a good start – way to go DHS!

- *The state should make it possible for every foster youth to get a driver's license.* We know this is tough. A foster parent's car insurance goes up if they add a teen driver in their house. But it's really important that we be able to drive to work and after school activities. Yes, we should prove that we can be a responsible driver like every other teen but we especially need to have a driver's license when we leave care. Some counties are recruiting people who will be the adult in the car so teens can get their practice driving time. That's a beginning - keep trying to make this happen.

- *Youth in care should have a certified copy of a birth certificate, Social Security card and state photo ID.* Thanks to the attention we brought to this in *VOICE 1*, DHS has made it policy that caseworkers need to get these critical documents for us. Without these documents youth can't get a job, open a bank account, or even travel on an airplane. Private agency workers can't get these documents for kids in care so it needs to be done by DHS workers. It's improving but mostly for those of us enrolled in Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative – because our voices are the loudest. It's still not happening often enough for all kids. Judges need to make sure all youth have their critical documents before their case is closed.

- *All foster youth should be entitled to free tuition at any state college or community college.* Thanks to DHS and youth advocacy efforts some colleges, especially private schools, are offering scholarships, year-round housing, mentors and other supports to foster youth. The number of foster youth receiving Chafee Educational Training Vouchers has doubled since *VOICE 1*.

Education planners, where available, are making a big difference in helping foster youth enroll and making sure they know all about the financial aid that is available. We don't want a free ride – we want a hand up. And if our parents can help pay for college, they should be required to. We want to make sure people understand that parents who abuse or neglect their kids aren't always poor. There's a long way to go and there needs to be more education planners, but at least we're seeing examples of how things could be better.

- *Foster youth should be eligible for Medicaid until their 21st birthday.* We understand that the Department of Community Health has gotten federal approval to make all former foster youth eligible to age 21, and that they're working with DHS to make sure enrollment is seamless and automatic. That's great but workers will still need to make sure youth understand their rights before they leave care because right now we don't know we're eligible for Medicaid, how to get it, or what doctors and dentists accept it. This is a really big problem.

voice 2: more needs to be done

Courts Can Help More

There are many ways that judges can make things better for foster kids. We think children or youth should not be forced to testify against their parents, but always allowed to speak in court if they want. Court proceedings are very intimidating, but the judge can do a lot to make sure the youth or child is



**Here's what I want
to say to my judge:
I'm about to age out.
What should I do?**

We need a law
for sibling rights.



comfortable in the court room. More time should be set aside by the judge to meet with the youth, and to make sure all parties are heard. Family group meetings should be held before each court hearing. Lawyers should always meet with the youth before a hearing, and not just in the hallway outside the court room. Too often we don't understand what is going on in court – our lawyers should be held accountable for lack of communication. The judge has a lot of power and should use it to make sure that all the following issues are being addressed.

Sibling Bill of Rights

Make sure foster youth are allowed to maintain positive connections with siblings. Our brothers and sisters are the most enduring, longest-lasting relationships we have. We've known them all our lives and shared the same experiences. This is why we need to keep contact with them – so that our relationships survive into adulthood, even if one of us is adopted. Too many of us aren't allowed to see our siblings, we don't know how they're doing and after a while we can't even find them. This is just devastating. Judges need to make sure that doesn't happen, which includes mandating sibling contact before an adoption is approved. Please support a sibling bill of rights that would help us stay connected to our brothers and sisters, because there is nothing more important than family.

Family Preservation and Support

Provide more services that will keep families together. We understand and appreciate very much that the state's primary concern is safety for children. But too often our parents are out there in the dark, and if the state put as much money into services that would help them keep the family together safely we wouldn't need to suffer all the trauma of removal. Don't sacrifice the need to keep us safe, but for many of us the human cost of breaking us apart is too high. Judges and court workers need to be trained better so they ask families

if they're getting the services they need to stay together, or get back together. The system wasn't made to tear families apart – it was made to build stronger families. If we are removed, we deserve to know why and what's going to happen. And our parents need to know how to get their kids back.

Termination of Parental Rights Often Too Quick

Don't be so quick to terminate parental rights. Michigan has one of the highest rates of termination in the country. Yet too few teenagers are adopted. This leaves too many of us leaving care without a permanent family connection. More money needs to be put into front-end services to families. If kids can't live safely with their parents, every effort should be made to keep them with other relatives whenever possible. Extended family members and guardians need to receive the same financial supports that foster families do.

Nothing About Us Without Us

Include foster youth in the decision making process before removing them, making a change in placement, or when considering reunification. DHS is supposed to be holding these team decision making meetings but it's not happening often enough. Caseworkers need to refer kids to a TDM more often. This meeting should bring together our families, foster parents, caseworkers, community people who can provide supports, peer advocates and most importantly us. Make sure the youth understands what the meeting is about, who everyone is, and is comfortable asking questions. Put together a handbook or video that will be given to all foster youth about what to expect. Give the youth a say in who should be at the meetings so his or her voice is not ignored. Let the youth know about the meeting more than 5 minutes in advance. If we are going to be moved, we should have time to gather our belongings and not just have someone put them in a plastic garbage bag for us.



**We want to
be cared for,
not paid for.**

**Cut caseworkers
some slack with
the budget situation,
but they still need to
communicate with youth.**



Don't Put Us In The Juvenile Justice System If We Don't Need To Be There

Make sure foster youth enter the system through child welfare instead of juvenile justice. Too many kids who enter the juvenile justice system are also suffering from abuse or neglect, but how they are classified creates a huge difference in eligibility for services. Judges and caseworkers need to make sure they are classified in the way that makes them eligible for things like Youth in Transition, Educational Training Vouchers and Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative. Kids who enter as delinquents should get the same treatment as other foster kids.

Allowances Help

Make sure youth receive an allowance for their personal use. Although it's policy, many foster youth report this isn't happening. We can't learn to budget if we don't have our own money. Residential facilities especially need to understand this. We need bus passes, hair cuts, movies, but sometimes it would be great if we just had some money to decorate our rooms or buy a present for someone special in our lives.

Foster Homes For Teens Can Be A Reality

Recruit more foster homes for teens. Youth board members have hosted foster parent appreciation dinners. We want to show them that we're just normal teenagers and it's not our fault we are in foster care. We want to tell them about all the good things they've done for us and also the things that they could do to make our lives easier. Since we can't have our own family we need to feel part of theirs. What we're hearing from foster parents is that this really helps support them. But DHS continues to advertise for foster parents in the "Help Wanted" section of classified ads. Please – being a foster parent is hard but it shouldn't be considered a job. We want to be cared for – not paid for!

the Michigan youth board delegates 2007



Let Foster Parents Hear From Us

Include youth in all foster parent trainings. This is happening in counties that have a youth board, and foster parents seem to appreciate it. More than anything else we need more foster parents to understand why it's so important to keep all our siblings together. If we can't be placed together, we should be in the same neighborhood and foster parents should do everything possible to make sure we continue to see each other. We need judges, caseworkers and foster/adoptive parents to hear this message!

Help Us Stay Healthy

Mandate physical and dental check-ups. Judges should require that kids in foster care get regular visits to doctors and dentists. But do not over-medicate us! It's too easy to say we're a problem so we must need drugs.

Transportation..Transportation

Provide transportation to after-school events and social gatherings. We're already isolated when we're removed from our families and friends. We need a normal teenage life. If we can't drive ourselves we need someone to take us. We know foster parents have many demands on their time, but we hope that our efforts to train and appreciate foster parents will help them understand this need.

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

**“ Every single youth
in our focus group
could tell us
the exact date, year
and circumstance
of their removal.
We could feel their pain,
even though for some,
it has been many years.”**



**One study showed that
the rates of post-traumatic
stress syndrome among
alumni of the foster care
system were higher
than among war veterans.**

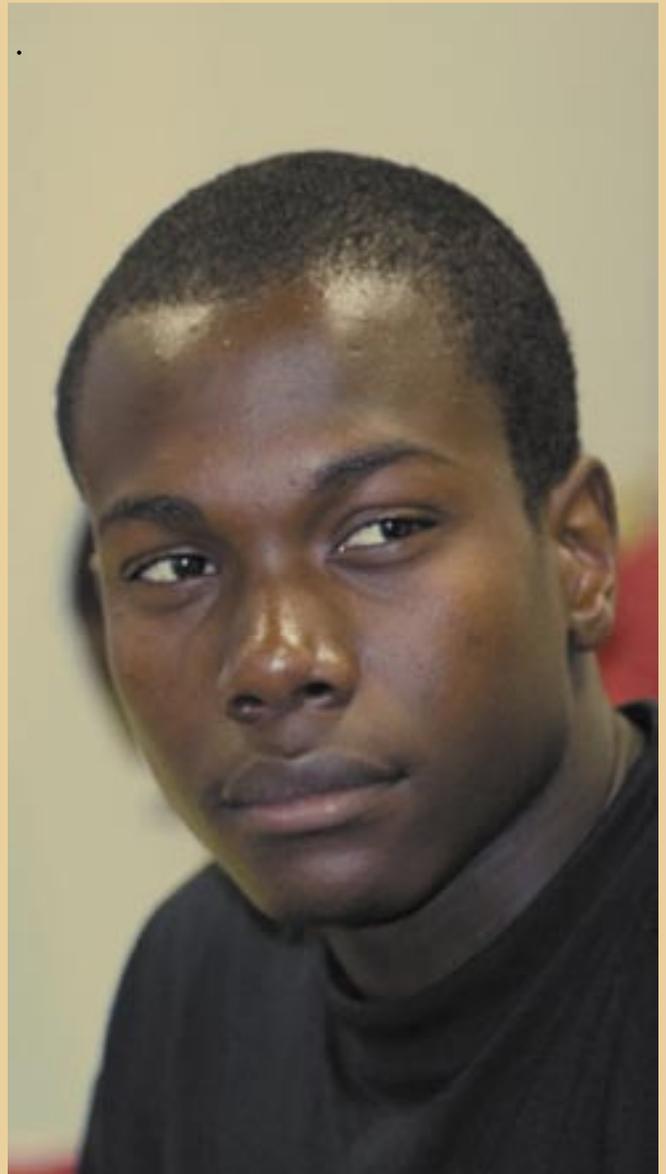


Adam said “So what will it matter to us if we have talked to you?”

How is it after substantiation of neglect, African American children are more likely to end up in foster care? Black children enter care at higher rates, stay longer and are reunified less often than white children.

IN BLACK AND WHITE

THE PICTURE FOR CHILDREN OF COLOR IS ESPECIALLY TROUBLING. A report from the Michigan Advisory Committee on the Over Representation of Children of Color in Child Welfare found that while African American children represent slightly less than 18 percent of all children in the state, more than half of the children in foster care are African American. This means almost one in 50 African American children in Michigan are in foster care, compared to almost one in 250 white children. This is true even though studies by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services say that there are no racial differences in the incidence of child maltreatment. For too many children there is a “slippery slope” leading from children’s protective service to juvenile detention or even prison – racial over representation in the foster care system helps feed disparities in juvenile justice and corrections.



Michigan youth boards: on the move

Since the Department of Human Services first received a grant from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative in 2003 we've expanded from 2 youth boards to 18, representing 28 counties and almost 70% of the foster kids in Michigan. And other counties are beginning to develop youth boards. Here are just a few of the great things we're doing with support from fantastic professionals and community partners:

- We're providing trained youth peer advocates to support foster kids in team decision making meetings.
- In Wayne County we've held a Summer Training and Employment Program (STEP) for the last two years, providing more than 200 foster youths with paid internships in career-oriented jobs of their choice. We especially want to thank the many employers who worked with us to mentor and support above and beyond what we expected.
- In Northwest Lower Michigan we've tripled the number of foster youth enrolled in post-secondary education, thanks to a terrific education planner who not only helped youth fill out FAFSA and other financial aid applications, but also encouraged us to believe we should even apply in the first place.
- The Macomb County youth board developed a video for kids to help them understand what to expect when they are taken from their parents and put into foster care. We also put together a FAQ sheet for youth about the team meetings they're entitled to

request whenever a decision is being made about them – meetings that include birth and foster families, and other supportive non-professionals.

- In Mecosta County we held the Amazing Race, introducing foster youth to college campuses with a day-long challenge event.
- We've held many community luggage drives and other fundraisers to collect things needed by foster kids going to college or setting up housekeeping – or just moving from one foster home to another.
- A major hospital in Wayne County sponsored a foster youth health summit that provided vision screening, diabetes testing, information about reproductive health, dental care and other health needs of young adults.
- Midland and Bay Counties raised enough money from local foundations to start a youth board that includes kids who've been adopted from foster care. We're working together to develop a mentoring program that links every youth enrolled in MYOI with a caring adult.
- In Livingston County we have been meeting with the local K-12 schools to help educate teachers and counselors about the issues faced by foster youth. We've raised awareness about the role of DHS and Protective Services to help people overcome the misconceptions and stereotypes they have about kids in foster care.
- Washtenaw County youth board members have helped feed the hungry at a local homeless shelter, and have helped fundraise for a local center where victims of sexual abuse are forensically interviewed. We're committed to supporting community agencies that too often are called on to support foster youth.
- In Saginaw County we participated in Race Equity focus groups to make sure our voices were heard about the disproportionate number of youth of color in foster care.



We Couldn't Have Done This Without Support From the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is a national foundation whose mission is to bring together the people, systems and resources necessary to assist all youth leaving foster care make successful transitions to adulthood. The Initiative is measuring success by improved outcomes in education; employment; housing; physical and mental health; and personal and community engagement.

Launched in 2001, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative was informed by two of the leading foundations focused exclusively on child, youth and family well-being: the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs. To test its theory of change the Initiative makes grants to ten demonstration sites: Atlanta, Connecticut, Denver, Des Moines, Maine, Michigan, Nashville, Rhode Island, San Diego and Tampa. It is in these states and communities that we are all learning how to most effectively create opportunities and improve outcomes for this specific vulnerable population.

The Initiative also provides technical assistance and access to the ideas, people, skills, effective examples and learning opportunities sites need to expand opportunities for young people. Along with national partners the Initiative advocates for improved policies and practices that impact youth leaving foster care. Products to inform policy makers and practitioners are published and widely distributed.

The Initiative and its partners in the demonstration sites rely on five core strategies in implementing this work:

- **Youth Engagement:** developing the skills and leadership techniques of young people so that they are meaningfully involved in all aspects of implementation, and become advocates for themselves and others.



- **Partnerships and Resources:** bringing together key decision-makers who take responsibility for leveraging public and private resources to provide increased opportunities for young people in foster care.

- **Research, Evaluation and Communications:** documenting results, and identifying and disseminating evidence-based and promising practices.

- **Public Will and Policy:** galvanizing public will in order to influence local and state policies and practices to increase opportunities for young people leaving care.

- **Increased Opportunities:** creating opportunities through the Opportunity Passport™, a package of resources including a personal bank account for short-term expenses and cash; a matched savings account (IDA) for long-term asset building; and door openers

developed on a local basis to help fill the gaps and needs identified by foster youth.

And in 2006 We Formally Became the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative

In 2003, the Michigan Department of Human Services began its partnership with the Initiative in Wayne county and ten mostly rural counties in Northwest Lower Michigan. Since then Michigan has opened more than 600 foster youth Opportunity Passports™. These youths have saved about \$500,000 and have made more than 250 asset purchases matched by almost \$100,000 in grant, state and federal funds. The Department of Human Services has made a formal commitment to expand this initiative statewide. This commitment includes significant staff and financial resources, and is an important recognition in Michigan that our foster youth can be better served by reforming the way both the government and communities provide supports to “our children.”

“Can you ask
the Judge
to give
my parents
one more
chance?”

VOICE 2 is dedicated to the many kids and families caught up in the foster care system. We also want to acknowledge our appreciation of the former DHS Director Marianne Udow and Supreme Court Justice Maura Corrigan. They've listened to us and used their influence, both personally and professionally, to give us many opportunities to engage others. Without their support of *VOICE 1* we probably wouldn't have made it to *VOICE 2*. Thank you Ms. Udow and Justice Corrigan, and thanks to all who have made the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative a light for us.

VOICE 2 is brought to you by the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative a partnership between the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and the Michigan Department of Human Services.

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
- Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler, *On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When they Leave Foster Care* (Westview Press, 2004)
- *Kids Count Data Book 2007*, special issue devoted to youth in transition, The Annie E. Casey Foundation (Available at www.aecf.org)
- *A Call to Action: An Integrated Approach to Youth Permanency and Preparation for Adulthood*, The Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Policy (Available at www.aecf.org)
- *Permanency Pact: life-long, kin-like connections between a youth and a supportive adult* (available at www.fosterclub.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



**CHECK OUT
OUR GREAT WEBSITE
DESIGNED
BY AND FOR
MICHIGAN FOSTER YOUTH**

- www.michigan.gov/fyit - was created by DHS at the request of and with assistance from foster youth around the state. The web site provides information about things of interest to foster youth such as finding a place to live, how to look for a job, how to dress appropriately and important interview tips; key points when purchasing a used car and buying insurance; opening a bank account; deciding between a debit card, credit card or ATM card; finding financial aid resources for college; health information including substance abuse and pregnancy prevention, parenting tips, mental health and disabilities; links to other agencies and relevant websites and inexpensive entertainment options in their local area.
- 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.