

# A HANDBOOK FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE



How to maneuver your way through foster care, understand what is happening, and get what you need.

The purpose of this handbook is to help you:

- Understand what is happening while you are in foster care.
- Know who people are and what they are supposed to do.
- Know what documents are available and their purpose.
- Maneuver your way through foster care.
- Get what you need.

We hope you read it when you first come in to foster care and keep it with you as your journey continues.

This handbook is modified from “A Parent’s Guide To Child Protective Processes” by the Office of Children’s Ombudsman, and Children’s Charter of the Courts of Michigan, Inc. The modified version was developed in collaboration with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI) and MYOI Youth Boards. Special thanks to Bay County Youth Board.

# Table of Contents

	Page
Key People Involved.....	2
How Did I Get Here? .....	5
What Is Foster Care? .....	5
Rights and Responsibilities .....	6
Possible Placements .....	6
Permanency Goals .....	7
Visits and Meetings .....	8
Service Plans.....	10
Court Hearings .....	12
Planning for the Future .....	15
Services and Resources.....	18
Important Papers and Documents.....	21
Online Resources .....	22
Contact Information .....	23

## Key People Involved

When you are in foster care there are many people involved in making sure you are safe and your family is able to meet their goals, in the hopes of you returning home. The list below tells you who are the key people involved in your family's plan.



**Children's Protective Services (CPS) Worker:** The CPS worker is the person who investigated a report of abuse and/or neglect. The CPS worker assessed your safety and made a recommendation to the court on whether it was safe for you to remain at home or enter foster care.

**Foster Care Worker:** The foster care worker is also called a "caseworker." Caseworkers are from either the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) or a private foster care agency and are assigned to work with you and your family. The caseworker will help you and your family develop a service plan that will lead to you being reunited or for you to find a safe and permanent family. Your caseworker visits with you, your parent(s) and your siblings, attends court hearings, reports on your family's progress and makes recommendations to the court about what should happen next.

**Judge or Referee:** A judge or referee is the person who conducts court hearings. At each hearing the judge or referee listens to the information and evidence presented, makes decisions about where you are living, what goals your parents are meeting and what the next steps should be. The judge will:

- Decide if there is a high enough risk of harm that you should be removed from your parents care.

- Decide parenting time. Parenting time is the time you spend visiting with your parents when you are in foster care. The court decides how often and how much time your parent(s) and/or family members get to spend with you while you are in foster care.
- Review your family's progress on the service plan.
- Order your parent(s) to comply with the service plan.
- Decide if you can return home.
- Review and decide if you need to change your permanency plan.

**Prosecutor/Assistant Attorney General:** The prosecutor or assistant attorney general is an attorney who represents the state and/or MDHHS at court hearings.

**Lawyer-Guardian Ad Litem (LGAL):** The LGAL is the person who represents you and your best interests. He/she is responsible for:

- Talking to you and team members about your needs and sharing any important information to the court.
- Telling the court what he/she thinks is best for you.
- Telling the court what your wishes are.
- Explaining to you what is happening in court.
- Attending all court hearings.
- Visiting you before each hearing.
- Making sure you are getting the services listed in the case plan as well as any services you request, or that are ordered by the court.

**Foster Parents:** Foster parents are licensed by the state of Michigan to take care of you while you are in foster care. Foster parents may be single or married. Your caseworker includes your foster parents in discussions about you and your family's needs and progress on meeting the goals in the service plan.

**Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)\*:** The CASA is a trained volunteer who makes recommendations to the court about your best interests. He/she asks you about how you are doing in your placement, school, and other services that are provided such as counseling. The CASA shares your updates with the court to ensure that your strengths and challenges are shared with the court.

**Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI)**

**Coordinator:** The MYOI coordinator is responsible for managing the county's youth board and financial literacy training. The coordinator is a resource for older youth in care who may provide trainings in education, employment, housing, health and community engagement.

**Education Planner\*:** An education planner is an MDHHS staff person who assists you with any education needs you may have, including helping to make sure you can stay in your same school you were attending before you came into care, when possible. They may help you plan for college or vocational school.

**Youth Advocate\*:** A youth advocate is a young person who has been in foster care and is trained to assist his/her peers in understanding and participating in Permanency Planning Conferences.

\* These positions may not be available in all counties and responsibilities may vary by county and case.

## How Did I Get Here?

Being in foster care does not mean you did anything wrong or are guilty of anything.

A Children's Protective Services (CPS) worker of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) went to court after investigating your family for a complaint of abuse or neglect. If you are in foster care, it means a judge or referee decided it was necessary to place you in foster care because he/she was concerned about your safety.

If it was an emergency situation, you may have been removed from your home by a police officer, or by a CPS worker, with court approval. The ability for you to return home depends on your parent's or caregiver's ability to provide a safe environment.

## What Is Foster Care?

When you are in foster care you do not live with your parents. Foster care exists so kids and youth can be safe until their parents are able to provide a safe home again. Where you are placed depends on your specific needs and available placements. It is important that you tell your worker about family or friends that may provide a good home or be a support for you. These supports may include a family friend, a neighbor, a teacher, or someone else who has impacted your family in a positive way.



## Rights and Responsibilities

Within 30 days of entering foster care, your caseworker must review your rights and responsibilities as a young person in care. If your caseworker has not gone over this form or discussed your rights and responsibilities you should ask them to do so.

## Possible Placements

**Relative/Kinship Care:** A relative/kinship placement is a home where you live with a relative, such as a grandparent, aunt, uncle or cousin. This type of care is the preferred type of placement your caseworker will try to find for you.

**Foster Home:** A foster home is a family home licensed by the state of Michigan. A licensed home means the foster parents have attended foster parent training, and their house is considered safe and appropriate for you.

**Pre-Adoptive Placement:** A pre-adoptive placement is a home where the parents are committed to adopting you. Children and youth are sometimes adopted by other family members, friends or foster parents. You should talk to your caseworker and pre-adoptive parents if you have questions.

**Residential Treatment:** A residential placement is where multiple youths live and are cared for by a staff of trained professionals. Residential placement is available for youths with behavioral concerns who need specific treatment. The goal of residential care is to provide treatment so the youth can move back to a community placement.

**Independent Living:** An independent living placement is when a young person has his/her own apartment or lives in someone's home and pays rent. Independent living is

primarily for youth ages 18 – 20. A requirement to be in independent living is that a youth must be attending school or employed. While a youth age 16 or 17 can reside in an Independent Living placement as a minor, they must be in a home with an adult who provides support and guidance.

## Permanency Goals

When you are in foster care, your caseworker establishes a permanency goal for you based on your long-term plan. The preferred permanency goal is:

- **Reunification** – going back to live with your parents.

If you cannot return home to live with your parents, the permanency goal may be:

- **Adoption** – having a family take legal responsibility for you as their child. Your foster care case would close once your adoption occurs.
- **Guardianship** – going to live with someone who is appointed by the court to take care of you, such as a family member, friend or other supportive adult. Your foster care case would close once your guardianship occurs.
- **Permanent placement with a fit and willing relative** – living with a relative who has committed to take care of you but is not legally your guardian. In this situation, either your biological parents or MDHHS continue to be your legal guardians and therefore will need to continue to provide consent for things.
- **Placement in another planned permanent living arrangement (APPLA)** – living in a foster home or in your own apartment.

## Visits and Meetings

If you are in foster care, you are not living with your parent(s) and you may or may not be living with some or all of your siblings. Even though you are not living with your family, you have a right to keep a strong and healthy relationship with them. Therefore, visits are scheduled to make sure you can spend time together as a family.



**Family Visits:** Parenting and sibling time, also called visitation, is important for you and your family. A visit may happen at an MDHHS office, restaurant or at a home. You and your family can spend time together during visitations and it may be monitored by agency staff. Visitation can be emotional for everyone and may be difficult for you and your family. Some common emotions youth have expressed related to family visits include: happiness, anger, sadness, fear, relief, anxiety and guilt. All of these emotions are valid, and you shouldn't feel bad about them because they are common feelings for young people in your situation.

Here are ways to help you manage the emotions you might feel about visits:



- Know intense feelings are normal and should be expected.
- Find a trusting person to talk to about how you feel.
- Go somewhere private and scream or cry.
- Write about how you feel.
- Find out details about the visit such as when and where it will be held and who will be there.

- Expect visits may be difficult for your parents. They may act differently when being observed visiting their kids in such odd circumstances.
- Discuss how you feel with your parents during a visit.
- Talk to your legal guardian ad litem (L-GAL) or caseworker.
- Seek outside help from a trusted professional if your emotions become more than you can manage by yourself.

**Sibling Visits:** You are entitled to have regular visitation with your siblings when you are not placed with them. Your caseworker will help in making a plan so that you can visit with your siblings at least monthly. There may also be a plan to speak with them on the phone.

**Caseworker Visits:** When you are first placed out of your home, the caseworker sees you at least two times a month for the first two months. After that, the caseworker visits you, at least monthly. You must be seen in your placement by your caseworker at least once per month. Other visits may happen at school or other settings. The caseworker should make time to talk to you alone. Visits are one way to ensure your safety and to talk to you about how things are going.

**Family Team Meetings (FTM):** FTMs will occur at several points during your time in foster care, including when you first enter foster care or if you have to move placements. The purpose of the meeting is to ensure that your placement is a safe and supportive environment and that all of the people involved in your family's life can participate in important decisions.

The FTM is an opportunity for you to voice your concerns and requests about what you want or need. You can also choose to invite people that you want at the meeting.

**Semi-Annual Transition Meeting:** A semi-annual transition meeting is a type of FTM that will be held every six months after you turn 14. You will have a chance to discuss what you want and need and identify supportive adults.

The meeting will include discussion about housing, education, employment, transportation, financial management skills, emotional/mental/physical health, substance abuse and other areas that may impact you. More information can be found in the Service Plan section.

**90-Day Discharge Meeting:** Each youth who exits foster care at the age of 16 or older must have a 90-day discharge plan. The 90-day discharge meeting must occur between 60 and 90 days prior to your exit from care and is when the plan is developed. The plan must include what you identify as your priority needs in areas of housing, education, health insurance, employment services, continuing support services, mentors/supportive adults, and financial management skills.

## Service Plans

Case service plans keep track of the work the caseworker does and the progress made on the goals set with you and your parent(s). The case file contains all foster care reports about contacts, visits and services



provided to your family. It includes the Initial Service Plan, the Updated Service Plan, and the Parent Agency Treatment Plan and Service Agreement. You have a right to see what is in your plans and can request a copy of your reports any time. Below are descriptions of what these terms mean:

**Initial Service Plan (ISP):** The Initial Service Plan is a report written by the foster care worker that includes information about you, your family and your parent(s). It identifies the

services needed to bring your family back together.

**Updated Service Plans (USP):** The Updated Service Plan is a report written by the caseworker every 90 days. It includes updated information about you and your family, the progress made toward achieving the permanency goal, recommendations about services, and ongoing planning for you.

**Parent-Agency Treatment Plan and Service Agreement:** The Parent-Agency Treatment Plan and Service Agreement is developed by the caseworker, parent(s) and youth. The Parent-Agency Treatment Plan also lists the services that are provided to you and who is responsible to provide them. If the goal is for you to return home, the plan will outline what your parent(s) and your worker must do to make the home and living situation safe for you. After you turn 14, you should be signing your Treatment Plan. If the goal is for you to return home, the plan will include:

- Recommended services for your parents and you.
- Actions your parent(s) must take before you can return home.
- Actions your foster care worker must take.
- Parenting time, expectations and arrangements.  
Parenting time is when you visit with your parents.

The court reviews the plan and makes changes as needed. The court ensures the plan addresses the following areas as they relate to your family:

- Housing.
- Employment.
- Mental health counseling.

- Substance abuse treatment.
- Parenting classes.

## Court Hearings



Court hearings play a critical role in foster care. The court hearing is the time when you, the caseworker, your parent(s), and the lawyers meet with a judge to review the progress on your family's goals and determine the next steps. You have the right to attend the court hearing and meet with your legal guardian ad litem. It may feel intimidating to be in court with lawyers and judges. But it is important for your voice to be heard; they need to know how you feel about what you want and need. The different types of court hearings are described below.

**Preliminary Hearing:** The preliminary hearing is typically held prior to the removal from your home or within 24 hours of removal. The judge or referee tells your parent(s) why a petition was filed, what the allegations are against them, and why you were removed from their care. If your parent(s) say the allegations are not true, a trial will be scheduled.

**Pre-Trial Hearing:** The court may choose to have a pre-trial hearing before the actual trial. At this hearing, the attorneys give the court a list of people who may testify as witnesses for your parent(s) or MDHHS at the trial. A date for the trial is usually scheduled at this time. In some cases, the parents admit to the allegations or plead "no contest," and a full hearing is not necessary.

**Adjudication Hearing or Trial:** Adjudication is the legal process when a judge reviews evidence from opposing parties so he/she can come to a decision that determines

rights and obligations between the parties involved. An adjudication hearing must occur no later than 63 days after you are removed from your parent's care. Evidence is presented to the court, and witnesses will testify and be cross-examined. Sometimes, it is during this hearing that parents tell the court that some or all of the allegations are true or plead "no contest," and a full hearing is not necessary.

Other times, parents tell the court they have done nothing wrong. In that case, the case goes to trial. At the conclusion of the trial, the court decides whether you should stay in foster care or be returned to your parent's care.

**Dispositional Hearing:** The dispositional hearing must occur within 35 days after the adjudication hearing. At this hearing, the court orders your parent(s) to achieve certain goals so you can safely return home. Your caseworker recommends services for your parents which are outlined in a Parent-Agency Treatment Plan and Service Agreement.

In certain cases, MDHHS may seek termination of parental rights at the beginning of your case. If so, termination of parental rights may occur at this hearing.

**Review Hearing:** Review hearings take place at least every 91 days after the dispositional hearing, for as long as you remain in care. At each hearing, the court reviews your parent's progress. The court then decides whether you should return home or stay in foster care. You have the right to attend and voice your opinion to the court. The court also monitors your adjustment to foster care and checks to see that your health, educational and social needs are met.

**Permanency Planning Hearing:** The permanency planning hearing must occur no later than one year after you were removed from your parent’s care. The purpose is to:

- Determine a permanency goal for your future.
- Decide if you can safely return home.
- Decide if you will remain in foster care.
- Decide if it is necessary to begin the process to terminate your parent’s parental rights.

**Termination Hearing:** “Termination” means a parent’s rights to parent his/her child will be ended permanently. If a legal petition has been filed to end parental rights, the court holds a termination hearing or trial. Evidence is presented to the court, and the judge decides whether there is enough evidence to terminate your parent’s parental rights. The court considers your best interest when deciding whether or not to terminate parental rights.

**Voluntary Release:** Your parent(s) may decide they cannot provide a safe home and/or situation for you. If this is the case, your parents may voluntarily release their parental rights. If they do, a full termination trial will not be held.

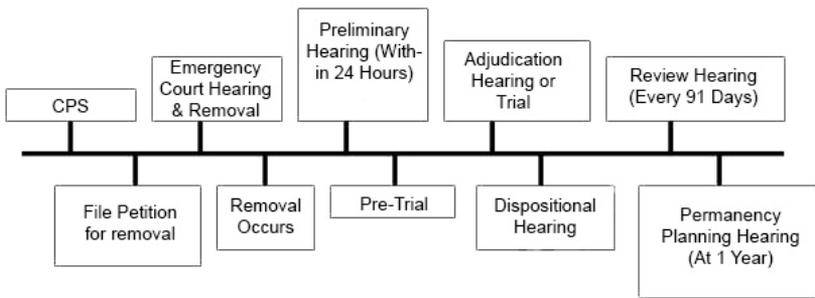
### **Tips for Going to Court**

Court rooms are formal and professional, and it may be a new experience for you. It may be intimidating. There are also a lot of rules when you go to court. Below are some tips to help you feel more comfortable and prepared for court.

- Look your best.
- Leave food and drinks outside.
- Take off your hat inside the courtroom.
- Ask your attorney questions.

- Address the judge as “Your Honor.”
- Answer questions honestly.
- Use respectful language.
- Do not chew gum.
- Do not bring cell phones into the courtroom even if they are turned off.

## Timeline for Court Hearings



## Planning for the Future

If your foster care case remains open until age 18, you may be eligible to remain voluntarily in care until you reach age 21. Some young people want to leave foster care at age 18, but you may have the option of entering Young Adult Voluntary Foster Care (YAVFC) Program. YAVFC can offer financial and emotional supports that you may not have if you choose to have your case closed at 18. See more information about YAVFC under Services and Resources.

As you prepare for the future and transition into adulthood you must think about what skills you need and who you can count on for support. Having a lifelong committed adult in your life eases your transition into adulthood and provides you with someone to ask questions to, celebrate successes with and lean on for support when stressors occur

throughout life. People lean on their supportive family for things such as:

- Celebrating graduations, birthdays or weddings.
- Advising on relationships, housing troubles and decision-making.
- Listening and talking about daily life.

You should also think about skills and goals you have as they relate to housing, education, employment, and health and community connections. Some things you will want to consider are:

**Life skills:** You need to know:

- Laundry.
- Housing cleaning and safety.
- Money management and banking.
- Grocery shopping, cooking, and nutrition.
- Organization for taxes, bills, other files, and appointments.



**Education:** A high school diploma is critical not just if you want to go to college but also for any job opportunity. If you are not on track to graduate from high school, work with your school counselor and/or caseworker to make sure you have a plan to graduate.

In addition to having a plan to graduate high school, you should also consider options for attending a vocational training, community college, or a four-year university.

Extra-curricular activities such as volunteer work, sports, creative arts, theatre, or student council, are also good ways to increase your chances of acceptance into post-secondary education. There are financial resources available specifically for foster youth. See the “Services and Resources” section of this handbook or ask your caseworker for more details.

**Employment:** As you think about leaving high school you should also think about what type of career you want to have. You need a steady job to pay for rent, bills, food and other needs. Think about what type of post-secondary education you need for the career you want. You may also want to think about internships and volunteer experience – these will help build your resume. Work with your school counselor or caseworker to write a resume.

**Housing:** If you are not reunified with your parents or living with a committed family, you may need to think about what type of housing you will have when your foster care case closes. Some of the things you should consider are:

- Do you know where safe and affordable neighborhoods are located?
- Do you know about rental leases and renter’s insurance?
- Do you know about landlord and renter responsibilities?
- Is there someone you know who would be a trustworthy roommate to share expenses so you can save money?
- Have you created a budget that includes all rent, utilities, and food?

**Health:** As a young person, you still need to have regular physicals and dental appointments. In addition, healthiness is not just physical health. It also includes mental and emotional health. You should start to think about how you plan to take care of yourself as you transition to adulthood.

Some things to consider or discuss with a supportive adult are:

- Do you know about Foster Care Transitional Medicaid?
- Do you know what type of health insurance you have and what it covers?
- Do you have a medical power of attorney?
- Are you ready to schedule your own yearly physicals and dental appointments?
- Do you know how to find doctors, therapists, and emergency rooms?

**Community Connections:** Community connections are services and programs in your neighborhood that could be a support to you such as: after school programs, community centers, food banks, donation centers, child care agencies, and many more. As you transition into adulthood you should consider the following questions:

- Have you thought about what community connections you need?
- Do you know what community connections are available in your area?
- Do you know how to access those connections?

## **Services and Resources**

There are services and resources available to youth in foster care. You may be eligible for the following resources. Talk to your caseworker to determine your eligibility.

**Michigan Works!:** Michigan Works! is an employment agency. The agency can help you obtain job training, interviewing skills and job placement. Your caseworker may

refer you for services while you are in foster care. You can also go to the office and ask for assistance. Make sure you talk to your caseworker about Michigan Works! because it will put you on the right track for getting a job. For more information, go to [www.michiganworks.org](http://www.michiganworks.org).

**Youth In Transition (YIT):** YIT funding provides goods and services to youth who are in foster care at age 14 and older until the age of 23. These funds are intended to help you become a successful adult. YIT funds can be used for things like pre-college expenses, employment assistance and health services. The funds are only available if there is no other way to pay for the services needed. In addition, each county may have different amounts and rules for using YIT funds. You can get more information about YIT by going to [www.michigan.gov/fyit](http://www.michigan.gov/fyit).

**Foster Care Transitional Medicaid (FCTMA):** If you were in foster care at the age of 18 you may be eligible for medical coverage through FCTMA until you turn 26. If you are 18 or older when you leave foster care, and you are not returning home, ask your caseworker to ensure your medicaid is set up.

**Education and Training Voucher (ETV):** The Education and Training Voucher is a funding source for post-secondary education for youth who have been in foster care. ETVs can help pay for vocational school, community college or a four-year university. You must be enrolled in the ETV program **before** you turn 21! If you are enrolled before 21 you can receive funding until you are 26. You must have your high school diploma or GED and be registered at an accredited school before applying. For more information go to: [www.mietv.samaritas.org](http://www.mietv.samaritas.org).

**Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI):** MYOI is a program that focuses on financial literacy and youth advocacy. The program provides training on money

management, and skills that help you become a successful adult. Local youth boards serve as a support network and are a way to share your voice and thoughts on making the child welfare system better. For more information ask your caseworker and go to [www.michigan.gov/fyit](http://www.michigan.gov/fyit).

**Young Adult Voluntary Foster Care (YAVFC):** YAVFC allows for youth to stay in foster care until the 21st birthday. If you chose to enter YAVFC, you will continue to receive caseworker services, and may receive a monthly stipend to assist with living expenses. To be in YAVFC, you will need to be in school or working on a regular basis.

**Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA):** Any student planning to attend college should complete the FAFSA online. It is completed after October 1st for the following schoolyear. You want to be sure to answer “yes” to the question about being a ward of the court after the 13th birthday, this will ensure you get the highest amount of student aid available. You apply at <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/fafsa> The application is free, if you are being asked to pay to complete it, you are not on the correct site.

**Tuition Incentive Program (TIP):** TIP provides funding for youth who are attending a Michigan college. You must be registered for TIP by August of your graduation year. Go to <https://www.michigan.gov/mistudentaid/0,4636,7-372--481218--,00.html>

**Fostering Futures Scholarship:** If you were in foster after the age of 13, you may be eligible for Fostering Futures Scholarship. It will assist with college expenses, including tuition, housing, and school supplies. Go to [https://www.michigan.gov/setwithmet/0,4666,7-374-87551\\_61346---,00.html](https://www.michigan.gov/setwithmet/0,4666,7-374-87551_61346---,00.html) for the application.

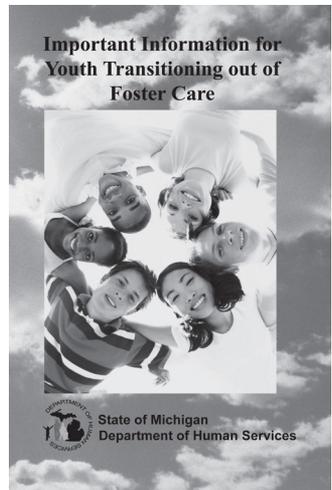
**Campus Based Support Programs:** Many Michigan colleges have programs specifically designed for students who have been in foster care. Services may include a scholarship, a campus coach, and mentor opportunities. You can find an updated list of these programs, as how to apply for each, on the Foster Success Michigan page at <http://fosteringsuccessmichigan.com/library/university-support-programs-for-youth-who-were-in-foster-care>.

**Fostering Success Michigan (FSM):** A statewide initiative that aims to increase awareness, access, and success in higher education and post-college careers for youth and alumni of foster care. The FSM website offers a variety of resources and information about services that are available at Michigan colleges and in the community. <http://fosteringsuccessmichigan.com/>

**National Foster Youth Institute (NFYI):** In partnership with organizations, policymakers, and child welfare advocates across the country, NFYI is involved in a number of programs aimed at helping foster youth and their families, which include leadership training, job shadowing and internships and congressional show programs. <https://www.nfyi.org/>

## Important Papers and Documents

Ask your caseworker for the DHS Publication 858, Important Information for Youth Transitioning out of Foster Care. Publication 858 gives you more information on services and funding that are available and where to go for assistance in getting your critical documents. The following documents should be given to you by your



caseworker or your caseworker should help you get them:

- Birth certificate.
- Photo ID (drivers' license or state ID).
- Green card (only if you are not a U.S. citizen).
- Social security card.
- Medical Passport: The caseworker completes the form called the DHS-221 Medical Passport during the entire time you are in foster care. The Medical Passport includes medical information about your biological mother and father and a record of all your medical care.
- Medicaid Card.
- Education records.
- DHS-945, Verification of Foster Care for College Financial Aid.
- MDHHS-5748, Verification of Placement in Foster Care.

## Online Resources

[www.michigan.gov/fyit](http://www.michigan.gov/fyit) – This is the MDHHS website for youth transitioning out of care.

[www.fosterclub.com](http://www.fosterclub.com) – This website provides a lot of information and support for youth transitioning out of foster care across the country.

[www.jimcaseyyouth.org](http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org) – The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative leads the way in advocating for older youth in foster care.

# Important Contacts

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_



The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) does not discriminate against any individual or group because of race, religion, age, national origin, color, height, weight, marital status, genetic information, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, political beliefs or disability.