



Young People and Families from Foster Care Seek Support from Candidates before Candidates for Governor, State Legislature

Rochester, MI – Before she entered foster care as a child in early elementary school, Gabriella Malory found refuge at school. “School was my escape from the trauma at home,” she said. Now in her 20’s, Malory advocates for the life-changing opportunities that scholarships for a college education or technical training can offer youth in foster care – something she wasn’t able to access because of an eligibility requirement.

Jenni Brown and her husband have cared for nine children from foster care. All had significant issues at school related to the abuse and neglect that brought them into the child welfare system. Each child had one and sometimes two parents who also spent time in foster care. “The big piece to me is trauma. Trauma changes everything when you think of the pain children go through not only from the abuse but from being taken away from everything they know.”

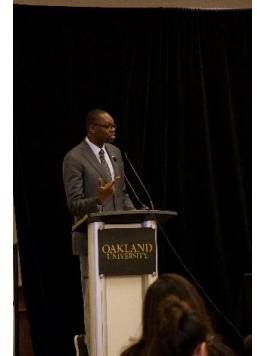


Both women shared their stories and asked questions of 10 candidates running for state House and Senate seats in southeast Michigan at a special candidate forum run by young adults and families with experience in foster care. The event took place at Oakland University in Rochester on Oct. 18 and was sponsored by groups that work with children and families in the system, including The New Foster Care, Fostering Success Michigan, Oakland University, Wayne State University, The Judson Center, Bethany Christian Services, and Vista Maria. It was the third of nine forums across Michigan that Michigan’s Children helped facilitate in recent weeks. Young people and parents with experience in foster care served as questioners.

The forum was designed to raise issues that may not otherwise be discussed before Michigan’s General Election by raising the voices of youth who experienced foster care in this state. The discussion focused on barriers youth face when aging out of foster care; the need for consistent

mental health care; resources to stabilize families and prevent foster care placements; access to affordable housing and transportation; respite care for foster parents; employable workforce skills for transitioning youth; and scholarships to help those pursuing a post-secondary education (only 2-4 percent of children from foster care attend college).

The questions came straight from the experiences of the questioners, including young Arielle Duncan, who told how she had lived in eight different homes and centers beginning at age 13. Another, Justin Black, a student at Western Michigan University who aged out of foster care in April, told the panel and audience of nearly 200 that many of his siblings and peers are stuck in minimum wage jobs, or struggle to launch careers. He asked how they would help youth from foster care develop skills necessary for independent lives beyond minimum-wage jobs.



“Having a voice and being able to use it has been really important for them,” said Khadija Walker-Fobbs, The New Foster Care’s Executive Director. “This forum has given them a sense of purpose. They don’t want other children experiencing the same challenges they have.”

The forum drew top-of-the-ticket candidates who gave brief remarks: Bill Schuette, the Republican gubernatorial candidate; Garlin Gilchrist II, Democratic gubernatorial candidate Gretchen Whitmer’s running mate; and John James, the Republican U.S. Senate candidate. Panel participants were: Michael McCready (R) and Jeff Pittel (Lib), 12th State Senate; Marty Knollenberg (R) and Mallory McMorrow (D), 13th State Senate; David Wolkinson (R) and Mari Manoogian (D), 40th State House; Doug Tietz (R) and Padma Kuppa (D), 41st State House; and Michael Webber (R) and Kyle Cooper (D), 45th State House. Gilchrist pledged that a Whitmer Administration would be a partner by providing services including quality education and technical training with two years of debt-free schooling. “Anything that serves that many children is significant and important,” he said. “You need to know you have support from the state government. We need to reform . . . that’s our vision.”



Schuette said he became familiar with foster care while serving as a judge on the Michigan Court of Appeals in cases involving parental right termination. “I’m open to how we can make it better and improve it, looking at state government, and giving this system a life of its own,” he said. “The more I listen, the more I can learn, and the more I can help solve problems.”

Nearly half of youth in foster care have had four or more adverse experiences exposing them to toxic stress and the possibility of impaired cognitive development unless support and services are present, according to Michigan's Children's [2018 Election Brief, Foster Care Matters](#). Compared to their peers, youth who age out of the system often face grim outcomes: failure to graduate high school, substance misuse, unemployment, homelessness, incarceration, early pregnancy, and chronic health conditions.

We think it's critically important for candidates to hear directly from young people about issues they're dealing with in their lives and how the government can make their lives better," said Matt Gillard, President and CEO of Michigan's Children, which has hosted youth-led forums in two previous statewide election cycles. Along with family-led forums this year, they have taken place in Bay City, Lansing, Newaygo County, Kalamazoo, Holland, Detroit, Wyoming and Adrian.



Even if the participating candidates had never before looked into the state's welfare system, the questioners in Rochester offered them a crash course into its complexities. Recent college graduate Markita Terry, a young entrepreneur who started a pet service four years ago, asked the candidates how they would improve mental health services, a common struggle for children and families in the system. She recounted how she bounced helplessly across seven high schools within the 10th grade because of unaddressed, trauma-related behavioral problems.

Walker-Fobbs said that the issues raised at the forum tie to agencies that Legislators and the Governor have responsibility for, namely the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, the juvenile justice system, and that they reveal barriers for foster youth in finding housing and transportation. Historically, foster care resources in Michigan have largely been underfunded with the state only allocating enough dollars to cover required federal matches. In addition, the Legislature has still not approved a Children's Assurance of Quality Foster Care reforms, which create additional protections for foster children in Michigan.

"I hope that these issues continue to be on the minds of these candidates as they assume office and consider new policies. We need our most vulnerable children to remain at the forefront of people's minds. They should not be an invisible population. They're innocents, wards of the state, which means we all have responsibility for them," Walker-Fobbs said. For the most part, the candidates' answers suggested they understood the connection. "If we are elected, it should be our job to fix all those problems," Mallory McMorrow said.

Here's how the state House and Senate candidates answered Terry's question, "What can we do to create more consistent support for mental health care for children and youth in the foster care system?"

- **Pittel:** "Foster children are wards of the state and are being evaluated for mental, physical and cognitive disabilities – that needs to be very consistent. Homes need to be aware of mental issues and appropriately compensated through special tax credits or incentives. Schools with special needs students need to have sufficient funding from the state. There's got to be subsidies for the parents and schools."
- **Cooper:** "This is personal topic for me after nearly losing my younger brother to suicide. We should have a very school-oriented approach to mental health, to help eliminate the stigma and make sure every kid has access to it. I'd like to see a minimum of one counselor or social worker in school per 200 students. And make sure counselors are compensated properly. Happy counselors equal happy kids."
- **McCready:** "We addressed some of these issues in the appropriations process in 2012-13 with the Fostering Futures Scholarships. One of the issues that kept coming up was that some of the children placed in foster homes are not getting good backgrounds and counseling in mental and physical challenges. Some are put into homes that may not fit the issues they have. This creates problems. It's not necessarily the children at fault but the state that failed in discovering the issue before they were placed into the home."
- **Knollenberg:** "This is very complex issue. We need to recognize a number things come into play – in federal laws, state laws, case law come and private providers. Trying to find consistent solution is very difficult. There's a pilot in place now and we're working now on having the right outcomes. There's a recognition with Legislators that we need to see outcomes."
- **Manoogian:** "Addressing how children are treated in the system regarding mental health, I'd like to see increased wraparound services in the classroom, so that children entering the classroom with mental health issues are a priority. Early developmental screening is incredibly important for any kinds of mental health issues. We need to insure when we look at policies that they are a top priority."

- **Tietz:** As an Oakland County commissioner, he said he’s discovered how inadequately funded mental health services are in the county’s jail system. “We need more money,” he said. “This is something we need to recognize in government – the importance of mental health.”
- **Webber:** Webber said he’s followed a House task force on mental health in which some recommendations are coming into fruition. “One is funding for CMH (Community Mental health). The other is prioritization of foster care children’s services for mental health. More social workers and case managers will go a long way toward helping.”
- **McMorrow:** “Consistency is what guides adoptive families forward. A lot of families who are adopting or fostering are not prepared to take on the challenges. These are very different challenges from being a first-time parent. I would like to expand loan repayment programs for people going in with social work degrees, supporting people who want to go into this work. Then I’d like to boost funding for Community Mental Health services, which are essential to making sure services are available, and having a consistent point of contact (for children in foster care.)”
- **Wolkinson:** Wolkinson said lawmakers needed to properly fund mental health services. “It’s very important that that we think about how to incentivize employees, caseworkers, to stay in in the system longer. “How can we make this a more attractive profession and how can we make the compensation so that people are able stay in it full-time and children stay in same geographic area and service aren’t destabilized because of the lack of permanence in the relationship.”
- **Kuppa:** “I believe our state budget must reflect a priority for mental health services. I agree with placing a child in the most appropriate home, but you don’t know that until after they are placed. You continue to create mental health situations. The real important thing is “We direct enough of our state resources to proper fund mental health services.”

Michigan’s Children is the only statewide, independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children, from cradle to career, and their families.