



Date: July 15, 2019
To: MDHHS Conference Committee Members
From: Matt Gillard, President & CEO
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Re: Budget Recommendations Supporting Children, Youth and Families

Thank you for the opportunity to again provide input into decision-making around the Department of Health and Human Services budget. Michigan's Children is the only statewide and independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children and youth, from cradle to career, and their families, with a focus on solutions that improve equitable outcomes for children. As you are well aware, the decisions you make related to the MDHSS budget impact the safety, security and success for many struggling children, youth and families – those involved in the child welfare and foster care systems – and through community-based strategies that prevent cases of abuse and neglect.

As you make final recommendations on this budget, we would like to highlight the following mechanisms that could help to better support children, youth and families:

SUPPORTING PARENTS. Common sense and strong research demonstrate that the well-being of parents matters to their children's well-being, education and life success, and to the strength and stability of families. Too many families face barriers to opportunities, including poor mental health, violence, and economic instability, making it more difficult for their children to graduate from school, enter the workforce, and support families of their own.

Recommendations:

- 1. Use the point of difference between the House and Senate recommendations to further invest in abuse and neglect prevention through the Children's Trust Fund.** Rather than the cuts proposed by both chambers, restore last year's funding increase to maintain the existing programs at the CTF, and increase state funding for community-based child abuse and neglect prevention through the CTF to \$3 million to expand the capacity of prevention councils and services across the state. Local child abuse and neglect prevention programs funded by the CTF support parents by coordinating community stakeholders to increase access to evidenced supports like home visiting, parenting classes, counseling, child care, transportation and prenatal care for families. Funded efforts from license plate fees and income tax donations for the CTF have fallen precipitously over time.

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- 2. Support the Senate’s recommendation to fully fund both implementation of the Healthy Michigan Plan and supports for individuals enrolled in the Healthy Michigan Plan who need employment training or related services.** Young adults and parents (and, by extension, their children), who are subject to these work requirements are at risk should lose access to health care services, and nobody deserves to lose health care coverage due to preventable barriers or administrative gaps caused by a lack of investment.

PRESERVING STABILITY AND RELATIONSHIPS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE. Too many families face barriers to stability including poor mental health, substance misuse, violence, inadequate parenting skills and responses reflecting the traumas that they faced as children. When we decide to separate families, we bear the responsibility to definitively say that children and youth, and often their families and caregivers, are doing better with system attention than they would be otherwise, regardless of where they are born or currently living.

Recommendations:

- 1. Support the House recommendation of \$1 million for incentive payments to relative caregivers who become licensed foster parents.** Incentive payments for relatives who are interested in becoming licensed are important, as is the need to continue to ensure financial resources to other relative caregivers who may face obstacles to becoming licensed. In Michigan, over 4,000 children live with a relative who is a licensed foster parent, and according to Generations United, it is estimated that more than ten times that many children outside the foster care system live with a grandparent or other relative.
- 2. Support the House recommended \$5.9 million increase to expand the Foster Care Supportive Visitation program and new Parent-Child Visit Assistance services.** Both of these programs assist in reunification for families in foster care. Most children involved with the foster care system are on a path to be reunified with their parents. Youth in foster care experience better outcomes when they maintain connections with their birth families, especially if there is an intention to reunify. However, birth families are often unable to access the support or services they need while their kids are in foster care.
- 3. Turn the Senate’s \$100 placeholder into increased investment in the Parent Partner program.** This proven effective program provides in-home mentoring and other supports to help birth parents succeed with reunification with their children.
- 4. Turn the Senate’s \$100 placeholder into a \$500,000 investment in Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) services.** CASA is a nationwide network of citizen volunteers trained to advocate on behalf of abused and neglected children in family courts. These advocates serve as the voice for children who cannot speak for themselves, helping judges, foster care organizations, and other parties make sound decisions regarding a child’s future. \$500,000 in this year’s budget with a total of \$1.5 million over three years is required to allow all children and youth in the court system access to a well-trained and well-supported CASA, beginning by ensuring access in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties.

ENSURING SUCCESSFUL FOSTER CARE TRANSITIONS. When young people leave foster care, many have not had the kind of experiences and successes that will help in their transition as they move into adulthood. Some have no one to help, resulting in a lack of concrete and social resources that leads to discouraging outcomes. These youth rely on the state to invest in their futures—we are failing Michigan’s children if we allow them to fall through the cracks.

Recommendations:

1. **Support the Senate recommendation of \$50,000 to support a legislatively created task force to improve the foster care system in Michigan.** With so many gaps in services and poor outcomes for this population, it is critical that the legislature take leadership.
2. **Support the House-recommended increase of \$1.5 million for Runaway and Homeless Youth Services on top of the current \$2 million.** Fewer than 60 percent of young adults who have experienced foster care report having stable housing, a much higher rate of homelessness than their peers. This funding supports a network of agencies that provide crisis and transition services for young people experiencing homelessness, but additional resource is necessary to fill service gaps around the state.
3. **Use a portion of funding for CASA Services for transitioning foster youth.** Turn the Senate's \$100 placeholder into a \$500,000 investment in CASA services, using \$50,000 of that to pilot the National CASA Fostering Futures initiative, which targets transitioning foster youth, to pilot efforts that layer support with the current Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative.
4. **Support the House recommendation of \$700,000 to serve survivors of human trafficking.** Nearly two thirds of all child sex trafficking victims across the U.S. in 2013 were from foster care or group homes. Human traffickers will prey on individuals who are most vulnerable, which is why foster children are particularly vulnerable to falling victim to sex trafficking and other forms of human trafficking.

In the scope of the entire state budget, these are small costs relative to the benefit of better preparing thousands of young people for productive, positive lives. We appreciate your efforts and continued service to make Michigan a place where people want to raise their kids. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions. We look forward to continuing to work with you to improve the success of our children, youth, families, and our state, especially those who are either experiencing foster care or at risk of entering the foster care system.