



Public policy in the best interest of children

Date: June 4, 2021

To: Michigan House of Representatives Adoption and Foster Care Task Force

Re: Priorities to Improve Foster Care Outcomes

We thank your task force's work to improve the odds for the over 13,000 children and youth experiencing foster care in Michigan who, by the nature of their circumstances, face challenges to their success. Despite some improvements, there are still predictably poor education and life outcomes for children, youth and families who have been involved in the foster care system. While nearly half of all young people in foster care have had four or more adverse experiences, we know that the care of supportive adults and services, including supports for their families, prevent children and youth from experiencing conditions affecting their learning, behavior, or mental health; and help them engage with school and with others.

Our organization's thirty years of work following research and learning from youths and families with lived experience show us proven ways to improve child and youth outcomes in child welfare, including:

**Services to address their complex needs**, especially when requiring collaboration between children welfare and other systems – ie., child care, health, education, courts, and workforce.

- We support the task force's attention to improving consistency and quality of LGAL (Lawyer-Guardian Ad Litem) and CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) experiences for young people in the system. We urge continued movement towards increased funding, training, and documentation for LGALs, as well as statewide expansion of CASA advocates, and expansion of CASA access to more older youth.
- We also urge the task force to consider crafting strong and independent mechanisms for grievance and oversight within the Michigan foster care system, including expanding access to child welfare complaints and corrective actions taken for independent evaluators; mandating public responses from MDHHS and appropriate Courts to all recommendations made by Foster Care Review Boards; and other reforms that would strengthen provisions of the Foster Child and Parent Bills of Rights.

**Targeted educational resources** for identification, assessment and services, and initiatives that help students catch up and inspire success. Once young people have been a part of the system, we need to better prepare them for life success. We strongly urge you to recognize the impact of improving the educational experiences of young people in foster care by:

- Improving inter-agency coordination to ensure that complete records of accumulated credits and service needs, including Individualized Education Plans, are maintained for students experiencing foster care and follow youth wherever they go.
- Improving collaboration between school districts and Michigan Rehabilitation Services to ensure the completion of Individualized Education Plans for older high school students and the appropriate transfer of student records to post-secondary providers.
- Preserving and expanding state support for competency-based education and flexible paths to graduation which provide flexible scheduling, smaller classes, alternative credit-bearing options, and post-secondary pathways for students who may struggle to achieve and graduate due to their personal circumstances.
- Preserving and expanding state support for adult education programs that provide opportunities for young adults to build literacy skills, earn a GED, and prepare for a career, improving workforce participation and family literacy rates.

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

### Officers

**Kurt Strehlke, Chair**  
*Bank of America*

**Shaun Wilson, Vice Chair**  
*Cadence*

**Tony Tamas, Treasurer**  
*Midland Business Alliance*

### Directors

**Jennifer Bowman**  
*Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity*

**Kristen Kangas-Kraft**  
*Blue Cross Shield of Michigan*

**Yazeed Moore**  
*W.K. Kellogg Foundation*

**Terry Murphy**  
*Retired – Certified Public Accountant*

**Diana Wong**  
*Eastern Michigan University*

**John Ziraldo**  
*Commonwealth Consulting*

**Matthew Gillard**  
*President and CEO*

**Supports for all caregivers in the system**, including birth, foster and adoptive parents, kin and other guardians, group homes and other institutional living arrangements. Supports should ensure timely access to health, mental health, child care, and other necessary services in addition to consistent training and communication.

- We support the task force's attention to improving the experiences and quality of kin and relative caregivers and urge the creation of a kinship advisory council and navigator program to support all kin and relative caregivers.
- We urge you to recognize the positive impact of maintaining connections to birth families and preferring family placements paired with the supports those families need.

**Supports for youth who age out of the foster care system** in addition to working to improve upstream outcomes. Maintaining support through young adulthood is even more critical for young people who have spent time in care, and services should be available regardless of age or geography, with access based instead on skill building and successful outcomes. Young people who exit foster care sometimes become relative caregivers themselves for siblings, or become a foster parent themselves. The success of youth aging out of care is inseparable from the goal of improving child welfare placements and outcomes. We urge the task force to consider:

- Expanding the Michigan EITC for young people who have experienced foster care by lowering the minimum age to 16 and basing the credit on combined federal and state EITC amounts. The recent American Rescue Plan Act amended the federal EITC to include eligibility for qualified foster youth aged 18. Young people working to help support themselves will benefit greatly from expanded income supports.
- Fully funding programs and coordinated services through the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative to put youth in care, who may take longer to get through high school and often have fewer home supports in their transition, on a path towards life success.
- Continue and expand state support for services for youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness or running away from their families, including a significant population of youth who have experienced foster care, so that youth can access services anywhere in the state.

We also urge the committee to recognize the transformative impact that our state can achieve by preventing issues at the earliest, thereby keeping children and youth with their families. That means addressing family challenges before they enter the child welfare, including domestic violence, substance use, mental health challenges, lack of parental knowledge or skills, lack of supports that stabilize work and school for families, such as child care and transportation, and lack of resources for basic needs.

We deeply appreciate your work on behalf of children for whom our state has assumed unique responsibility, and their families. You may email me at [matt@michiganschildren.org](mailto:matt@michiganschildren.org) or call me at 517-485-3500 to learn more.

Sincerely,



Matt Gillard  
President and CEO  
Michigan's Children