

The Oakland Press (<http://www.theoaklandpress.com>)

County, state officials learn about foster care system from those who lived it

By John Turk, The Oakland Press

Monday, February 24, 2014



Milford resident Dennis Schneider, who was raised through the foster care system, doesn't want sympathy.

"That's not what you want to hear" being a foster kid, said Schneider, 18, an engineering student at Western Michigan University. "What we really need is for the money (for foster care) to distributed correctly need to provide a stable house for the child to grow up, and we need mentors — we need guidance."

Schneider and several former graduates of the foster care system in Oakland County and beyond stood in front of lawmakers and elected officials Monday for the first KidSpeak event in Oakland, an event geared towards helping shape policy in foster care. The event, sponsored by the Kitsie and Albert Scaglione of Park West Foundation Voices for Michigan's Children, Foster Care Alumni of America-Michigan Chapter, Michigan Youth Opportunity Initiative and the Oakland County Board of Commissioners, was a chance for those in the system to share their stories.

Schneider, like many children in the system, said he was abused as a child, which landed him in foster care. He thought it was normal, he said, but when he started his life outside of foster care, his eyes opened.

"As you go through childhood, whatever happens to you, you think it's normal. Where the struggles really started to come is that when then you get into the real world, you find out what's really normal," he said. "There's a lot of things that could be changed (in the system), but the most important thing is to have someone who can guide them to success ... because they're just the same as every other kid."

Alana White, 19, who now goes to Oakland Community College, said a connection to foster care kids is tough when case workers have 20 to 30 children per case load, something she said she experienced.

"You feel forgotten about," she said. "I feel like a lot of (Department of Human Services) workers are needed."

One visit a month is not enough, said Tyler Price, who's been in 14 different homes.

"Kids are angry and DHS workers are stressed," said Price. "I was abused more in my foster homes than with my biological family ... I wasn't seen but once a month. I didn't have no random checkups, and I wish I did, because that wouldn't have given the foster parents time to put another face on."

Common calls for improvement among more than 30 who spoke were stability, security and safety in the foster care system, many who had come through the system feeling they'd fallen behind in their lives and the legal system.

County Commissioner Jim Runestad, from White Lake Township, has experienced foster care first hand — he and his wife were foster parents for four years and adopted out of foster care.

“In our training in foster care, it was so horrifying for us to hear the stories about what these kids go through,” he said. “We decided we were going to do this to try to make a difference in the lives of kids who have to go through the system.”

A big fear Runestad said he has is how many kids are at risk of falling into the hands of traffickers once they place out of the system or run away. He said he learned that more than 60 percent of runaways who are victims of sex trafficking had been in the custody of social services or in foster care, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

“There’s a statistic that when children are in facilities, they runaway at a much higher percent than they would in homes,” Runestad said. “Our goal for older youth who are placed into residential settings is to assist them with independent living skills, provide support and financial resources to them and find permanent family connections before the exit the foster care system.”

Over 13,500 Michigan children are a part of the foster care system, and 40 percent are from Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties. Twelve children from the tri-county area enter into the system on average every day, according to county officials.

Oakland County currently has 777 children in foster care, and only 7 percent are in residential settings as opposed to homes.

URL: <http://www.theoaklandpress.com/general-news/20140224/county-state-officials-learn-about-foster-care-system-from-those-who-lived-it>

© 2014 The Oakland Press (<http://www.theoaklandpress.com>)