

Dear Participant,

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with the Bloom Foster Family Research Team about your experiences with the child welfare system in Michigan. We are grateful for your openness and willingness to share your stories to improve the experiences of teens in care in the future.

We heard that so often the voices of youth formerly in care and families advocating for them go unheard. We hope by sharing this document, you can see your voices and concerns were heard. Thanks to your help, we have a better understanding of how to solve problems with the system.

This is a condensed summary of what we heard from youth formerly in care, resource families who provided placements for teens, and child welfare staff at Michigan DHHS.

What We Heard

Being a teen in foster care is a deeply disempowering experience.



The system is setting kids up to fail in so many situations, by not teaching, not helping with things they'd learn in a normal family."

— Youth formerly in care

1. Teen needs are not always being met and they are not receiving the necessary care to heal and thrive. All youth in care experience loss or trauma that requires additional emotional support.

- Meeting basic needs like shelter, safety, and food is the top priority for youth in care.
- Teens in care lack safe spaces to disclose physical, emotional, and sexual abuse cases.
- More care and consistency are needed to meet teens' emotional needs. Foster families lack training and/or resources to meet the needs of teens. Services are not always following youth through transitions.
- Emotional support and diverse therapies to process trauma are fundamental needs as well. The existing system of mental health care does not support youth in foster care.
- Teens need stable, supportive adults to accept, validate, and challenge them to feel prepared for their next phase of life.

2. Teens lack autonomy, information, and involvement in critical decisions related to their lives.

- Teens in care feel like they have little or no freedom or agency.
- Teens in care are not given a voice or involved in decisions about their lives.

- Teens' communication and movement while in care are closely monitored and restricted. Residential facilities were described as prison-like. Even those in family homes felt infantilized and lacked self-determination.
- Teens struggle to get access to information to understand what is happening or happened to them. Reasons for removal and placement decisions are not clearly communicated to teens in care.

3. Teens need more scaffolding to experiment, practice, and master skills necessary for adulthood.

- Teens feel abandoned to plan for their futures without information or guidance.
- Teens described needing greater academic support while in care and to plan for the future.
- Consequences for 'normal' teen behaviors become serious quickly, without safety nets and acceptance. Resource family training doesn't set caregivers up to understand teen behavior from a trauma-informed perspective.
- Teens are not always informed about or guided to much needed transition programs and services. Accessing financial and housing assistance is complex and difficult for youth to navigate and the options for those in the foster system are not always clear.

To address these challenges, we recommend:

1. Better training for resource families and child welfare staff
2. Improving support for youth transitions
3. Providing quality mental health care
4. Opportunities to build sustained relationships with caring adults
5. Providing services to help teens prepare for adulthood.

Most of all we heard that youth voices need to be uplifted in the child welfare system, and youth need to be listened to – both in current decision-making about their lives – and in how to improve experiences of care in the future.

Thank you again, for raising your hand to participate in this work. If you would like to review what we learned in more detail and our recommendations, we have attached our final presentation slides here. If you feel like we missed something critical or have questions, please let us know at bloom-foster-fam-research@bloomworks.digital. Thank you again for your participation.

Sincerely,

The Bloom Foster Family Research Team