

Understanding Foster Family Needs and Improving Effectiveness of Care

Michigan Foster Care Closet Background Research Report

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Mission of Michigan Foster Care Closet

Michigan Foster Care Closet is a non-profit organization that provides items such as clothing, shoes, toys, linens, nursery furniture, strollers, car seats, and school supplies to foster children and families for free. They believe that clothing is integral to children's self-esteem, and they were founded in order to provide access to quality clothing for foster children. They currently have three locations, all located in southeast Michigan.¹

The Problem

Michigan Foster Care Closet seeks a comprehensive system for qualifying donation intake and customer needs. They are somewhat interested in itemizing the goods that families take from the storefront in order to gain data to help with their stocking procedures. They do not desire an inventory system, however. The resulting system must be existentially simple due to the high volume of intake and output, the technological understanding and time of the customers, and the lack of opportunity to train volunteers.

Questions to be Answered within this Paper

1. How does foster care effect children's psychological state, and what are the factors involved?
2. What are the effects of clothing on human psychology?
3. How are similar organizations funded?
4. What are the implications for MFCC?

¹ <https://www.michiganfostercarecloset.org>

Understanding the Psychology of Fostered Children

Research in the area of psychology of fostered children is widespread and mature, and the problems have been well documented. Children within the foster-care system of western nations have been shown to have rates of “mental health difficulties” between 2.5 to 3.5 times the rate of non-fostered youth². Children outside of the foster-care system are predisposed to mental health and behavioral problems due to chronic illnesses, and children within the foster-care system are disproportionately more likely to experience the same chronic illnesses and, as a result, greater levels of mental health and behavioral issues³. It is estimated that 35 to 50% of all children in foster care show signs of “clinical-level mental health difficulties,” with approximately 20% more showing near-clinical levels of mental health difficulties⁴. Approximately 61% of foster children and young adults show behavior problems according to the Child Behavior Checklist⁵. These numbers fluctuate based on age, with younger children showing lower rates of mental health issues than older children and young adults⁶. It has been shown that the majority of these psychological problems come about due to the circumstances warranting foster care, rather than from the foster care itself. These include but are not limited to neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse -- the consequences of which range from mental health problems to drug and alcohol use and addiction⁷. Simply put, these circumstances are effectively a death sentence for a large percentage of fostered youth.

The solutions to these problems, however, are not likely to come from traditional one-size-fits-all methods of intermediation, and specialized and individual treatments are recommended for all children in foster care⁸. There are multiple proven methods for improving the mental health outcomes of children, in general, and fostered children specifically. For example, strong social support systems at home and at school have been shown to dramatically improve mental wellbeing in children, including those in foster care⁹. Social support at home can act as a moderator between child behavior and foster parents’ confidence in their effectiveness¹⁰, which will then have a significant effect on the child’s wellbeing, mental health, and future outcomes. Perception of social support is directly correlated with delinquency and attachment insecurity. The types of social support that showed the highest resulting positive effects included relationships between foster children and mentors and romantic partners, with relationships between children and foster caregivers and biological relatives showing smaller, but still significant, effects¹¹.

² Tarren-Sweeney, Michael. *M Weblogin*. 2017, link-springer-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/article/10.1007%2Fs10578-017-0763-7

³ Woods, S. B., Farineau, H. M. and McWey, L. M. (2013), Physical health, mental health, and behaviour problems among early adolescents in foster care. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 39: 220-227. doi:[10.1111/j.1365-2214.2011.01357.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2214.2011.01357.x)

⁴ Tarren-Sweeney, M. and Hazell, P. (2006), Mental health of children in foster and kinship care in New South Wales, Australia. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, 42: 89-97. doi:[10.1111/j.1440-1754.2006.00804.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1754.2006.00804.x)

⁵ Sawyer, M. G., Carbone, J. A., Searle, A. K. and Robinson, P. (2007), The mental health and wellbeing of children and adolescents in home-based foster care. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 186: 181-184. doi:[10.5694/j.1326-5377.2007.tb00857.x](https://doi.org/10.5694/j.1326-5377.2007.tb00857.x)

⁶ Tarren-Sweeney, Michael. *M Weblogin*. 2017, link-springer-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/article/10.1007%2Fs10578-017-0763-7.

⁷ Sylvia H. Oswald, Katharina Heil, Lutz Goldbeck, History of Maltreatment and Mental Health Problems in Foster Children: A Review of the Literature, *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, Volume 35, Issue 5, June 2010, Pages 462–472, <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1093/jpepsy/jsp114>

⁸ Tarren-Sweeney, Michael. *M Weblogin*. 2017, link-springer-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/article/10.1007%2Fs10578-017-0763-7.

⁹ Carly Magee, Martin Guhn, Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl, Eva Oberle, Mental well-being among children in foster care: The role of supportive adults, *Children and Youth Services Review*, Volume 102, 2019, Pages 128-134, ISSN 0190 7409, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.05.005>. (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740919300428>)

¹⁰ Cooley, M.E., Thompson, H.M. & Newell, E. *Child Youth Care Forum* (2019) 48: 289. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-018-9478-6>

¹¹ Zinn, Andrew, et al. “The Predictors of Perceived Social Support among Former Foster Youth.” *Child Abuse & Neglect*, vol. 72, Elsevier Ltd, 10/2017, pp. 172–83, doi:[10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.07.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.07.015).

Within the foster family, the time available to foster parents, the financial stability of foster parents, the familial stability of foster parents, and the ability to deal with adversity from foster children on the part of foster parents are some of the factors that can have profound effects on children's outcomes, and all must be considered when planning institutional and policy-driven solutions to the myriad of problems facing foster care and foster care outcomes.

Mental health is strongly correlated with different measures of success, including academic proficiency¹². It is extremely important that support systems are put in place to help steer statistically disadvantaged youth into happier, healthier, and more productive situations. The type of support provided must be multifaceted, with systems focusing on family screening, support groups, therapy, tutoring, etc. all playing vital roles in the psychological outcomes of fostered children. The impacts of these solutions will be life-long, and as such should be fundamental in any solutions presented.

¹² The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy, Volume 9, Issue 1, ISSN (Online) 1935-1682, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2202/1935-1682.2191>.

MFCC's Solution and the Accompanying Research

Michigan Foster Care Closet focuses on providing foster families with goods necessary for raising children and maintaining their social wellbeing. While they provide a large variety of goods, such as beds, strollers, toys, and linens, they focus predominantly on high-quality clothing. For this reason, I will focus the next area of research on the psychological effects of clothing on humans broadly and on youth specifically in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the effects of MFCC's goals.

Clothing can have an effect on the psychosocial feedback¹³ loop within all people but may have a particularly strong impact on children due to a number of factors¹⁴. The psychosocial feedback loop can be described as the give-and-take between an individual's perception of themselves and the individual's intuition regarding the public's perception of themselves. Depending on factors like cognitive development and relationship security, an individual's psychosocial understanding may be more or less egocentric or conformist¹⁵. As a child ages they typically experience a transition from social insensitivity (that is, the lack of awareness of other people's thoughts about them) into a heightened sense of self-consciousness, believing in most cases that others are paying attention to and judging them. Maturity, in this case, is seen as the age-related ability to find balance between egocentrism (social insensitivity) and conformity (falling in line with norms so as to prevent or control judgement)¹⁶.

In many cases the transition from ego-centrism into conformity includes a "narcissistic phase," wherein the individual begins to anticipate reactions of others in both real and imaginary scenarios¹⁷. It is at this phase that methods of self-expression are of their utmost importance, as a developing child's understanding and hypothesizing of potential perceptions by others is relevant for the first time. The combination of a hyper-active social perception with an inability to self-express to an individual's satisfaction can have profound social impacts later in life¹⁸.

Children within the foster-care system, likely to have been victims of various forms of neglect or assault, are at high risk for the development of anti-social behavior. The relationship between clothing and social development is particularly important for these children, as they are, in many cases, predisposed to negative social self-consciousness as a result of this mistreatment. Poor clothing can be a profound detriment to self-image¹⁹. Ensuring that a child with a history of traumatic experience is not perpetually forced to socially present with clothing

¹³ Kodzoman, Dujie. "THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CLOTHING: Meaning of Colors, Body Image and Gender Expression in Fashion." *Textile & Leather Review*, vol. 2, no. 2, Seniko studio d.o.o, 6/2019, pp. 90–103, doi:10.31881/TLR.2019.22.

¹⁴ Ryan, R. M. and Kuczkowski, R. (1994), The Imaginary Audience, Self-Consciousness, and Public Individuation in Adolescence. *Journal of Personality*, 62: 219-238. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.1994.tb00292.x

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¹⁸ Ryan, R. M. and Kuczkowski, R. (1994), The Imaginary Audience, Self-Consciousness, and Public Individuation in Adolescence. *Journal of Personality*, 62: 219-238. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.1994.tb00292.x

¹⁹ Kwon, Y. 1994, "Feeling Toward One's Clothing and Self-Perception of Emotion, Sociability, and Work Competency", *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 129.

that encourages negative judgement²⁰ is one of many ways to help a child avoid the negative outcomes present within the foster-care system. Expanding the clothing that is available to children in foster care is likely to encourage positive self-expression, statistically lowering the chances that the child will experience, or cultivate the experience of, negative social perception and the accompanying psychological trauma²¹.

²⁰ Petrilli, Christopher Michael, et al. "Understanding the Role of Physician Attire on Patient Perceptions: A Systematic Review of the Literature— Targeting Attire to Improve Likelihood of Rapport (TAILOR) Investigators." *BMJ Open*, vol. 5, no. 1, BMJ Publishing Group LTD, 1/2015, p. e006578, doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2014-006578.

²¹ Kwon, Y. 1994, "Feeling Toward One's Clothing and Self-Perception of Emotion, Sociability, and Work Competency", *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 129.

How Are Similar Organizations Funded?

Now that a direct link has been established between the philosophy and effect of MFCC, I would like to move on to the question of funding and organizational sustainability. I researched the financial outlook of other similar 501(c)(3) non-profits and found that a large majority are funded through national, state, and local grants, due to the widespread inability to capitalize on social need. After establishing grants as the primary mechanism for funding I moved to research the types of grants that are typically received by similar organizations and the application process for those grants. My findings are summarized below.

The United States government recognizes the value of non-profit organizations that promote public good. For that reason, the federal government earmarks a high percentage (about 30%) of its annual budget for contracts and grants to support these and similar organizations²². Contracts are intended primarily for supplies and services purchased by the federal government²³, and as a result are not relevant for the types of organizations considered in this analysis. Instead, grants, which are defined as an “authorized expenditure to a non-federal entity for a defined public or private purpose in which services are not rendered to the federal government,²⁴” are significantly more relevant.

MFCC, at this point, receives no money from federal, state, or local grants. They rely entirely on donations, but are willing to explore the possibility of receiving grant money to improve offerings and resiliency. Grants are not awarded with any specific criteria but are instead distributed based on needs within the 26 federal agencies based on recommendations by the Office of Management and Budget²⁵. Grants can take the form of block grants (the transfer of money from federal to state and local governments for a federalist approach to distribution), project grants (intended for projects like fellowships, training, or research), formula grants (noncompetitive and based on need, calculated based on an existing formula), and categorical grants (strict conditions must be established, such as Medicaid requirements, and are intended to support state and local governments)²⁶. MFCC’s business model means that they are particularly well-suited for federal block grants, which are almost always delegated to organizations focusing on social welfare and community development.

The United States Government paid \$137 billion for non-profit services. About 350,000 contracts and grants were awarded to about 56,000 organizations, with the average non-profit received six contracts or grants²⁷. Non-profits typically receive over half of their operating

²² Pettijohn, Sarah L. “Federal Government Contracts and Grants for Nonprofits.” *Urban.org*, Urban Institute, May 2013, www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/23671/412832-Federal-Government-Contracts-and-Grants-for-Nonprofits.PDF.

²³ Pettijohn, Sarah L. “Federal Government Contracts and Grants for Nonprofits.” *Urban.org*, Urban Institute, May 2013, www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/23671/412832-Federal-Government-Contracts-and-Grants-for-Nonprofits.PDF.

²⁴ “Glossary,” Office of Management and Budget, March 19, 2013, <http://www.USAspending.gov>.

²⁵ Pettijohn, Sarah L. “Federal Government Contracts and Grants for Nonprofits.” *Urban.org*, Urban Institute, May 2013, www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/23671/412832-Federal-Government-Contracts-and-Grants-for-Nonprofits.PDF.

²⁶ Pettijohn, Sarah L. “Federal Government Contracts and Grants for Nonprofits.” *Urban.org*, Urban Institute, May 2013, www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/23671/412832-Federal-Government-Contracts-and-Grants-for-Nonprofits.PDF.

²⁷ Pettijohn, Sarah L., et al. “Non-Profit Government Contracts and Grants: Findings from the 2013 National Survey.” *The Urban Institute*, Dec. 2013, www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/24231/412962-Nonprofit-Government-Contracts-and-Grants-Findings-from-the-National-Survey.PDF?utm_source=Forum%20Bits%3A%2012-6-13&utm_campaign=Forum%20Bits%3A%2012/6/13&utm_medium=email.

income from contracts or grants²⁸. Taking advantage of the grants afforded to non-profits is necessary both for the survival of vital human service organizations as well as to the continued functioning of many communities and governments. Organizations like MFCC, which provide extremely large, effective, and well-established social programs, would do well to take advantage of the large sums of money offered by federal, state, and local governments. The money will not only allow for greater stability in the organization's current form, but will also allow for flexibility in potential expansion and effectiveness in their reach.

²⁸ Pettijohn, Sarah L., et al. "Non-Profit Government Contracts and Grants: Findings from the 2013 National Survey." *The Urban Institute*, Dec. 2013, www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/24231/412962-Nonprofit-Government-Contracts-and-Grants-Findings-from-the-National-Survey.PDF?utm_source=Forum%20Bits%3A%2012-6-13&utm_campaign=Forum%20Bits%3A%2012/6/13&utm_medium=email.

Conclusions

Fostered youth are disproportionately disadvantaged due to factors outside of their control. Supporting foster families with resources that promote self-esteem among fostered children will not only help to ameliorate some of the psychological conditions they face, but will also greatly improve psychosocial behavior, the functioning of foster homes, and life-long outcomes, amongst many other benefits. Organizations like MFCC are doing well to address this specific problem area, but there are resources being offered that will greatly help MFCC in accomplishing their mission. The expansive number of grants offered to human service non-profits provide for an invaluable resource that MFCC would be remiss in ignoring out of complexity.

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