



Michigan lawmakers should allocate federal aid earmarked for foster kids | Opinion

Ov'varshia Gray-Woods, Carlos Correa and Alyssa Andrews | Detroit Free Press

School is about to start for the fall, bills and rent are due and Michigan youth who were raised by the foster care system are struggling with the ongoing economic and emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. But sadly Michigan is missing a critical opportunity to support young people.

The state Legislature is sitting on almost \$11 million Congress has dedicated to help foster youth survive COVID-19, and its aftermath. As alumni of the foster system, we know this situation up close and personally, and call upon our state lawmakers to distribute the already received funds so they can be used to help young people who desperately need them.

In December 2020, Congress passed the Supporting Foster Youth and Families Through the Pandemic Act as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. This included funds designated for youth in foster care after Congress heard a cry for help from young people across the country who were not being reached by general pandemic aid and did not have family to rely on.

Even before the pandemic, research showed the struggles young people in foster care suffer almost twice as much trauma as combat veterans. Some 20% become homeless on their first day out of the foster care system, and only 2-3% graduate from college.

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened an already difficult situation, adding a heavy emotional, mental and financial toll on all of us. Many of us are

heavy emotional, mental and financial toll on all of us. Many of us are alone as we navigate this uncertainty without parents or siblings. While our peers were surrounded by the nurture of home and family, we were often further isolated by COVID-19 restrictions. Many of our peers struggled to make ends meet and could not find ways to pay rent and meet their needs.

Other states have quickly moved to implement this federal law and help young people in foster care. Alaska, Arkansas, California, Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Mississippi, Oregon, South Carolina, and Tennessee have already implemented the law and are getting aid out to young people. Many more have followed. We are confused and heartbroken that funds have arrived in our state but they have not reached us. The indifference to the crisis we face speaks loudly to us, Michigan's foster youth, who have felt unheard and unimportant throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

As foster youth, we have been raised as wards of the state of Michigan through no fault of our own. We are your children. We depend on the Legislature, the most powerful decision-makers in Michigan, for our wellbeing and protection.

Young people with experience in foster care need emergency support. The absence of these urgent pandemic relief funds has worsened our circumstances and increased our unmet critical needs. There is not unlimited time – many youth will lose access these funds in September. The Legislature can solve this problem by approving the release of the federal funds designated for foster youth immediately and ensuring that the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services disseminates the funds for the support of foster youth with no more delay.

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