

## Request for Continued Foster Care Disability Navigation Funding

### Our Ask:

We are asking the State of Michigan to sustain funding for the Foster Care Disability Navigation program that addresses the educational needs of students experiencing foster care who have disabilities. **We are asking for a \$1 million appropriation annually for the next 3 years to The Arc Michigan to continue providing navigation services and external educational case management support through its network of advocates around the state.** This funding request is aligned with [recommendations](#) that came out of a MDHHS work group that included MDE, private agencies, advocates, and those with lived experience, as well as recommendations made to the legislature by the Interdepartmental Task Force on Service to At-Risk Youth Transitioning to Adulthood in 2006.

Funding pays for about 9 FTE expert education advocates around the state, intake support, specialized training in the educational rights of youth experiencing foster care, outreach, grant management and evaluation, and a student needs fund. Using caseload requirements from the state, we are working to scale the program to serve about 300 students and then work with MDHHS on whether additional scaling and funding is needed (as is done in the state of Washington).

Raising the graduation rate of one year's cohort of youth aging out of foster care to the national average would result in increased earnings and tax revenues totaling over \$2 billion and an estimated impact in excess of \$61,000,000 in one year alone ([source](#)). Stabilizing education has also been shown to stabilize foster care placements, a major concern in Michigan.

Success stories: [Jesse's Story](#), showing the impact of this model. [Letter from a foster parent](#) in Jackson.

### Background:

\$2 million was allocated by the Michigan Legislature in the 2023 budget in response to the abysmal graduation rates of youth experiencing foster care. These funds have been used to scale up the model around the state over the past two years.

The Foster Care Disability Navigation program is based on Student Advocacy Center of Michigan's (SAC) advocacy model that started in Washtenaw County in 1994 with years of data showing improvements in academics, grades and discipline. It was also modeled after external case management programs such as Treehouse. The state of Washington **invested \$12 million** (2022) in Treehouse, a human service organization that provides education advocacy, mentoring and other academic supports to youth experiencing foster care. They have achieved a long-term 4-year student graduation rate of 75%, significantly surpassing their state's overall 4-year high school graduation rate of 53%.

The Arc Michigan's network of local Arc chapters provides a unique opportunity to provide these special education advocacy services in local regions spanning across Michigan. Our advocates provide intensive support that helps youth understand their rights and options, secure needed education services in school, navigate special education, develop graduation plans, connect to credit recovery, decrease suspensions, expulsions and dropout, and increase achievement. Additionally, The Arc Michigan has been collaborating with the Student Advocacy Center of Michigan to provide intakes and technical assistance, due to their experience working with this population for more than 30 years.

### Need:

- We estimate that more than 7000 children experiencing foster care have disabilities. Up to 5% of the general population needs Tier 3 or more intensive support, so we know at least 350 of youth

experiencing foster care would need more intensive support. Graduation data shows us that in any one year, at least 195-200 seniors experiencing foster care need more intensive academic support.

- Only 41% of students experiencing foster care graduated in 4 years in 2022 (26% dropped out), compared to 81% statewide. This is [much lower than national rates](#).
- Pandemic learning loss and increased mental health needs are creating a need for more support and oversight for these students to ensure they are not falling through the cracks. States like Washington and [SAC's work](#) in Washtenaw have shown the success of this model.
- Education outcomes for students with disabilities in the foster care system are at a greater disadvantage without the support of an advocate who can help navigate and inform students of their rights under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

#### **Foster Care Disability Navigation Pilot Update:**

- In FY23, in just 9 months, new contracts were implemented with providers around the state, new advocates were hired, specialized training and protocols were developed, extensive outreach was conducted (7,000 reached) and ultimately, 80 youth were served.
- For FY24, in just Quarter 1 alone, we have already **served 38** additional youth and reached an additional 5,000 in outreach, putting us on track to nearly double our numbers.
- Our advocates continue to support students from the prior year until their needs are resolved, in addition to accepting new referrals.
- We anticipate the numbers of students served will continue to expand as we have now built a foundation of general awareness of the FCDN program throughout the state from our targeted outreach.
- We are working to scale up to serve about 300 youth and are in continued conversations with the MDHHS workgroup about how to expand. Current funding pays for about 9 FTE advocates, which using Child Care Fund Manual caseload requirements could serve 30-40 youth each.

#### **Suggested FY2025 Boilerplate Language:**

The department shall allocate \$1,000,000.00 for a work project to a nonprofit, community-based organization organized under the laws of this state that is exempt from federal income tax under section 501(c)(3) of the internal revenue code of 1986, 26 USC 501, with the mission to ensure that individuals with disabilities are valued in order that they and their families can fully participate in and contribute to their community, to provide supports for special education system navigation, and to improve educational outcomes for youth in foster care who have a diagnosed disability or suspected disability. Foster care youth also includes youth pursuing Young Adult Voluntary Foster Care, who are recently adopted (within 1 year), CPS Abuse and Neglect Cases, and those in kinship care.

Sincerely,



Sherri Boyd, Executive Director  
The Arc Michigan



Peri Stone-Palmquist, Executive Director  
Student Advocacy Center of Michigan