

# Gov. DeWine's foster care initiative gets feedback in Cleveland

Peter Krouse, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Jan 13, 2020



*The Children Services Transformation Advisory Council hears testimony about foster care, kinship care and other children's services.*

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine wants to reform the foster care system across the state, and if a Monday night public forum in Cleveland is any indication, reforms are needed.

One after another, recipients of care, providers of care or advocates for better care, gave their testimony before a group of about 100 people gathered at the Ronald McDonald House on the Cleveland Clinic campus at University Circle.

Front and center were members of the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council, which DeWine appointed to review the state-mandated, county-administered foster care system in Ohio and provide recommendations to make it better.

Monday night's forum was the 10th and last of the forums held around the state.

Among the problems that need to be addressed:

- Providers of kinship care, which is when children are placed in the care of relatives, do not receive as much financial assistance as foster parents and yet the demands are great. “It’s not about money, but you need money to keep everything going,” said Pamela Stewart, who agreed to take custody of three of her nieces and found supporting them to be a struggle.
- Group homes do not adequately prepare children to age out of the system. Rhi Kirkwood, who aged out of the system and lives in Cleveland, said children in residential facilities should be taught more about budgeting and other life skills that they need to be on their own. “I am 20 years old and I still don’t have my driver’s license,” she said.
- Several speakers told of mistreatment and neglect while growing up in the foster-care system. Dylan McIntosh, said he had 23 different placements with foster parents over 10 years, and experienced both caring and neglectful parents. At the age of 14, he said, he was placed in a home with a man and wife who were both 82 years old. One was blind and one had Parkinson’s Disease, he said. McIntosh said the system needs to provide more qualified parents and the money to help support them. Despite his difficult upbringing, McIntosh expects to graduate soon from Cleveland State University and one day help improve foster-care policy.
- Dannika Stevenson, a foster parent in Akron, said more thought has to be given to the process of reunifying foster children with their biological parents. Sometimes children are given back to their biological parents and it means going from a loving home back to one of neglect. “Some of these parents do not deserve to be parents,” she said.
- Other ways exist to help besides becoming a foster parent. You can be a court-appointed special advocate (CASA) like Kevin O’Boyle, who shared his story with the group. He said efforts are being made to expand the system so that it can work with children in foster care and residential treatment.
- One of the more heart-wrenching testimonies came from Makayla Lang, 22, a social worker who has a degree from Cleveland State University and is working on another from Case Western Reserve University. She entered foster care at 2 years old when her mother was addicted to heroin and her father was behind bars. Lang said she was 8 when her mother died and yet she was unable to cry. But she’s grateful now for the opportunity foster care gave her. “So, yeah. I’m glad I didn’t kill myself before I turned 18,” she said. Lang may have lost a mother, “but I have another family now and they love me and I finally love myself,” she said.

Members of the advisory council were only at the forum to listen. Kristi Burre, co-chair of the advisory council, said the testimony will be used to develop recommendations to be given to the governor.