

STEVE YAGER SPEECH : FOSTERING SUCCESS SUMMIT 2013 ANN ARBOR

GOOD AFTERNOON AND THANK YOU FOR THE WARM INTRODUCTION.

IT'S A GREAT PLEASURE TO BE HERE TO HELP CLOSE OUT THIS **SECOND ANNUAL FOSTERING SUCCESS SUMMIT**, AND TO DO SO WITH **THE HOPE** THAT WHAT WE TAKE FROM HERE WILL INDEED HELP US BRING ABOUT EVEN MORE SUCCESS AS WE WORK THROUGH THE REST OF THIS YEAR AND ON TOWARD 2014.

NOTE THAT I SAID---**HOPE**.

YOU KNOW, THAT WORD IS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT IN BASICALLY EVERYTHING WE DO WITH CHILD WELFARE AT THE MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES, BUT IT'S ALSO A WORD THAT IS LESS THAN CERTAIN—BY ITS VERY DEFINITION. THAT MAKES IT APPROPRIATE FOR CLOSING OUR GATHERING BECAUSE DESPITE THE MANY WONDERFUL THINGS THAT HAVE ALREADY BEEN ACCOMPLISHED, ITS HOPE—RATHER THAN CERTAINTY IN ULTIMATE SUCCESS--THAT WE HAVE, UNLESS WE ARE TRULY COMMITTED TO TAKING THE **NEXT STEPS** IN THIS IMPORTANT PROCESS.

I FIRMLY BELIEVE WE ARE NOW AT THAT CRUCIAL POINT THAT COMES IN ANY MAJOR AND WORTHWHILE ENDEAVOR, WHEN THE GROUNDWORK HAS BEEN LAID, WHEN THE LAUNCH TIME HAS PAST, WHEN PARTICIPANTS ARE BUSY CONGRATULATING EACH OTHER ON A WONDERFUL START, WHEN VULNERABLE PEOPLE HAVE BEEN HELPED IN A WAY THAT IS CLEAR AND CAN BE MEASURED, AND WHEN THE STORY HAS SEEMINGLY BEEN TOLD.

BUT HASN'T BEEN FULLY TOLD...YET.

ANALOGIES CONTAINING ALLUSIONS TO BATTLE ARE NOT USUALLY SOMETHING WE ENGAGE IN MUCH IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL WORK, BUT WHEN REFERRING TO A KEY JUNCTURE EARLY ON IN WORLD WAR II, BRITISH PRIME MINISTER WINSTON CHURCHILL WAS ASKED IF IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF THE END? HE REPLIED—“NO, BUT IT JUST MAY BE--- **THE END OF THE BEGINNING.**”

I BELIEVE THAT IS PRECISELY WHERE WE FIND OURSELVES NOW HERE IN MICHIGAN—AT THE END OF THE BEGINNING, IN THE ONGOING QUEST FOR FOSTERING SUCCESS.

SO—AS WE ALL PREPARE TO LEAVE THIS SUMMIT TODAY--WHERE WE NEXT GO FROM HERE, COLLECTIVELY--AND WITH THE VERY BEST INTENTIONS FOR OUR FOSTER YOUTH AND THEIR ULTIMATE SUCCESS IN BOTH HIGHER EDUCATION AND BEYOND --THAT WILL BE THE KEY TO NOT ONLY SUCCESS, BUT BEING ABLE TO SUSTAIN THAT SUCCESS AND TO BUILD UPON IT IN THE DAYS AND WEEKS TO COME.

LET'S REVIEW SOME OF THE **BUILDING BLOCKS TO THAT SUCCESS** THAT WE NOW HAVE IN PLACE, AND HOW THOSE FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS CAN HELP ALL OF US WITH THAT SUSTAINING EFFORT TO COME AS WE TAKE THE CRUCIAL "NEXT STEPS."

EVERYONE IN THIS ROOM KNOWS THE KIND OF ODDS THAT FOSTER YOUTH HAVE TRADITIONALLY FACED.

THE NUMBERS AND OUTCOMES HAVE ALWAYS PAINTED A VERY STARK AND SOMBER PICTURE:

- MUCH LESS LIKELY TO GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL, LET ALONE COLLEGE.
- MUCH MORE LIKELY TO BE INVOLVED, IN SOMEWAY, WITH BOTH THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM AND LATER WITH THE CORRECTIONS SYSTEM.
- MUCH MORE LIKELY TO BECOME HOMELESS AS ADULTS.
- MUCH LESS LIKELY TO RETAIN STEADY AND SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT AND A CAREER.
- AND THE LIST--THAT WE KNOW ALL TOO WELL--GOES ON AND ON.

BUT...THAT WAS THEN.

TOGETHER, IN A FAIRLY SHORT SPAN OF TIME, WE HAVE SEEN—AND BEEN PARTY TO-- SOME AMAZING WORK THAT HAS **FUNDAMENTALLY ALTERED** THE LANDSCAPE AS WE "KNEW IT" FOR MANY FOSTER YOUTH, AND--IN THE PROCESS-- GIVEN THEM A CHANCE TO TURN THE TABLES ON THE SOBERING FACTS I MENTIONED A MOMENT AGO.

- IN 2008 AN IMPORTANT FIRST STEP OCCURRED WITH PASSAGE OF THE **FOSTERING CONNECTION TO SUCCESS AND INCREASING ADOPTIONS ACT**, WHICH HAD SOME VERY SPECIFIC PROVISIONS FOR EDUCATION CONTAINED IN IT. IT LITERALLY MANDATED THAT STATES HAVE A HIGHER EXPECTATION OF SCHOOL SUCCESS FOR THEIR FOSTER CHILDREN AND YOUTH,

AND REQUIRED BETTER WORK FROM CASEWORKERS TOWARD KEEPING CHILDREN IN THEIR SCHOOL OF ORIGIN WHEN MAKING A PLACEMENT CHANGE.

- WHAT DID THAT LEAD TO AT DHS? IT LED TO WRITING BETTER POLICY AROUND THOSE PLACEMENT CHANGES AND ATTEMPTS TO HAVE CHILDREN REMAIN IN THEIR SCHOOLS OF ORIGIN.
- SHORTLY AFTER, **14 EDUCATION PLANNERS WERE HIRED** TO WORK DIRECTLY WITH OUR OLDER YOUTH, AGES 14 AND UP, ON ALL ISSUES THAT MIGHT ARISE CONCERNING THEM AND THEIR CONTINUING EDUCATION. FURTHER, WITH THE RECENT SIGNING OF **THE UNINTERUPTED SCHOLARS ACT** BY PRESIDENT OBAMA, OUR CHILD WELFARE WORKERS NOW HAVE BETTER ACCESS TO EDUCATIONAL RECORDS FOR THE PURPOSES OF CASE PLANNING AND POTENTIAL SCHOOL MOVES, THUS ENSURING FASTER AND MORE APPROPRIATE ENROLLMENTS.
- BETWEEN THE NEW EDUCATION PLANNERS, THE ADDING OF BETTER POLICY FOR ALL OF OUR WORKERS AND WITH THE UNINTERUPTED SCHOLARS ACT, THE STATE IS MAKING A CONCERTED AND SINCERE EFFORT TO LEAVE THE SILO'S BEHIND AND DO BETTER WORK, MUCH BETTER WORK—WITHIN OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM TO ASSIST OUR FOSTER CHILDREN AND YOUTH
- AT THE STATE LEVEL, WE SAW A HUGE AND VERY POSITIVE CHANGE SIGNED INTO LAW BY GOVERNOR SNYDER IN THE FALL OF 2011 WITH THE BILL THAT EXTENDS THE BENEFITS FOR FOSTER YOUTH ON A VOLUNTARY BASIS UNTIL AGE 21. THAT LAW WAS FULLY IMPLEMENTED ONE YEAR AGO, AND I AM PROUD TO SAY THAT TODAY, **WE NOW HAVE NEARLY 500 YOUNG ADULTS RECEIVING THE EXTENDED SUPPORT THEY NEED AT SUCH A CRITICAL TIME**, AS THEY TRANSITION IN THEIR LIVES AND BETTER PREPARE TO LEAVE STATE CARE—WITH A FIRMER FOUNDATION AND, HOPEFULLY, WITH MUCH BETTER ACCESS TO BOTH LIFE-SKILL AND CAREER TRAINING, AND BETTER ACCESS TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION THAT CAN HELP THEM, AS MENTIONED BEFORE, TURN THE TABLES ON THE AGE-OLD STATISTICS AND BREAK THE MOLD FOR FOSTER YOUTH AND HOW WE MEASURE SUCCESS IN THE FUTURE.
- DHS IS TAKING THE EXTRA STEPS AS WELL, FOLLOWING THE PASSAGE OF THAT ACT, IN THE **HIRING OF 31 MICHIGAN YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE CORRINATORS STATEWIDE**, SO

THAT WE CAN INCREASE THE SERVICES AND CONNECTIONS MADE WITH OUR FOSTER YOUTH AND WHAT'S MORE, HELP THEM CONNECT IN A NEW AND CRUCIAL WAY—PEER-TO-PEER, SO THAT ONE OF THE BIGGEST BARRIERS TO POSITIVE OUTCOMES IN THE PAST, THIS FEELING AMONG FOSTER CHILDREN THAT THEY ARE ALONE IN THE PROCESS, THAT THEIR FEELINGS ARE UNIQUE TO THEM AND THAT OTHERS ARE NOT WALKING THE SAME WALK, CAN BE OVERCOME TO THE BENEFIT OF ALL. BREAKING DOWN THE SILOS FOR THOSE OF US WORKING TO BETTER THEIR LIVES, BUT ALLOWING THEM TO BREAK DOWN THEIR OWN SILOS THAT KEEP FOSTER YOUTH FROM BEING EMPOWERED TO WORK TOGETHER FOR THEIR OWN BETTERMENT AND SUCCESS. WHAT AN IMPORTANT FIRST STEP THAT WAS.

THOSE ARE SOME OF THE THINGS WE HAVE SEEN FROM DIRECTLY INSIDE GOVERNMENT, BOTH AT THE FEDERAL AND STATE LEVEL IN TERMS OF LAW AND POLICY, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE FIRST STEPS WE HAVE SEEN FROM OUTSIDE OF WASHINGTON D.C. AND LANSING, ESPECIALLY AS THEY REGARD ACCESS TO AND SUCCESS WITHIN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM?

THE EFFORTS MADE IN THIS AREA HAVE BEEN NOT ONLY SUBSTANTIAL, BUT HAVE—AS I SAID BEFORE—ALTERED OUTCOMES IN SUCH A TRANSFORMATIONAL WAY THAT ITS HARD TO IMAGINE JUST A FEW SHORT YEARS AGO THE LANDSCAPE LOOKED COMPLETELY DIFFERENT.

- WHAT OCCURRED IN THE FALL OF 2008 CANNOT BE UNDERSTATED. THAT'S WHEN WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY BEGAN ITS **SEITA SCHOLARS PROGRAM**. 51 STUDENTS ENROLLED. 51. SOME OF THOSE VERY STUDENTS HAVE NOW BECOME COLLEGE GRADUATES, AND ARE GOING TO HELP US "TURN THE TIDE" ON THE STATISTICS THAT HAVE BEEN THE PREVIOUS BENCHMARK FOR FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD.

THAT GROUP OF SEITA SCHOLARS **HAS TRIPLED IN SIZE** IN JUST THE TIME IT TAKES FOR ONE STUDENT TO PROGRESS FROM BEING A FRESHMAN TO "WALKING" AT COMMENCEMENT. IT'S A SINGULAR AND STELLAR ACHIEVEMENT—AND ITS SUCCESS IS BEING REPLICATED, NOT WITH IDENTICAL PROGRAMS AT OTHER INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING, BUT WITH PROGRAMS THAT ARE AS UNIQUE TO THEIR INSTITUTIONS AS INDIVIDUAL GOALS AND ASPIRATIONS ARE UNIQUE TO EACH STUDENT.

- THE BLAVIN SCHOLARS PROGRAM HERE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN AND THE "FAME" PROGRAM IN EAST LANSING AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY HAVE ALREADY CLEARLY SHOWN THAT WITH THE PROPER SUPPORT, SUPPORT THAT IS BOTH FINANCIAL AND EMOTIONAL,

YOUTH COMING FROM STATE CARE CAN, INDEED, NOT ONLY SURVIVE BUT THRIVE IN COMPLETING THEIR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION.

- DHS HAS IMPLEMENTED THE INITIAL **INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS COACHES** PROGRAM, BASED ON THE ORIGINAL “CAMPUS COACH” MODEL FROM WESTERN. WITH THE HELP OF MORE THAN \$800,000 IN CHAFEE FUNDING, CONTRACTS HAVE NOW BEEN PUT INTO PLACE WITH ANOTHER SEVEN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING, INCLUDING: MSU; BAKER COLLEGE OF FLINT; SAGINAW VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY; U OF M-FLINT; FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY; WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY AND EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY. THESE CONTRACTS HAVE BEEN AWARDED ON A THREE YEAR BASIS WITH THE POSSIBILITY FOR TWO YEAR EXTENSIONS, THUS LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR BOTH A SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH AND THE ABILITY TO SUSTAIN AND GROW THAT EFFORT INTO BECOMING PART OF A PERMANENT SOLUTION FOR FOSTER YOUTH ATTENDING EACH OF THESE INSTITUTIONS IN THE YEARS TO COME.
- THE “COACHES” WHO WILL BE THE BACKBONE OF THESE PROGRAMS ARE CASEWORKERS EMBEDDED ON CAMPUS, WORKING DAILY DIRECTLY WITH FOSTER YOUTH IN TRANSITION, WITH THE ABILITY AND THE RESOURCES TO ASSIST, MUCH LIKE OTHER STUDENTS HAVE FROM THEIR OWN FAMILY SUPPORT SYSTEM, IN CRITICAL AREAS LIKE HOUSING ASSISTANCE, EMPLOYMENT, BUDGETING AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT, RELATIONSHIP BUILDING, MENTAL AND MEDICAL HEALTH NEEDS, PARENTING, AND MUCH MORE.
- IN ADDITION TO THE CASEWORKERS, ALL OF THESE CONTRACTS NOW REQUIRE THE RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING OF MENTORS FOR ALL THE YOUTH WHO PARTICIPATE, VOLUNTEER PROFESSIONALS FROM THE SCHOOL OR COMMUNITY WHO ARE READY AND WILLING TO LEND THEIR EXPERTISE IN THE GUIDANCE AND FURTHERING SUCCESS FOR FOSTER YOUTH AS PART OF THE HIGHER-EDUCATION JOURNEY.

ALL OF THIS COMES TOGETHER IN PAINTING A PICTURE OF SUCCESS FOR THOSE WHO JUST A FEW SHORT YEARS AGO WOULD HAVE BEEN NOT ONLY ON THEIR OWN—BUT ALONE AND POTENTIALLY ADRIFT—IN THE PROCESS.

MAYBE YOU READ ABOUT A YOUNG WOMAN RECENTLY IN BRIDGE MAGAZINE ONLINE, BY THE NAME OF NIKKI JENKS, A SOPHOMORE AT WESTERN MICHIGAN AND A SEITA SCHOLAR.

SHE SPENT YEARS IN FOSTER CARE—

SHE LIVED IN A NUMBER OF HOMES, FROM THE UPPER TO THE LOWER PENINSULA—
AND SHE ONLY STARTED THINKING IN TERMS OF COLLEGE WHEN SHE WAS FINISHING EIGHTH
GRADE, AFTER BEING ENCOURAGED BY HER TEACHERS AND HER CASEWORKERS.

NOT SO LONG AGO, THAT'S WHERE IT MIGHT HAVE ENDED. WITH SOME ENCOURAGEMENT. WITH
SOME HOPE. WITH SOME "BEST WISHES ON MAKING IT ALL WORK OUT."

WE KNOW THE OUTCOME FOR THAT MODEL. WISHFUL THINKING. HOPEFUL—BUT NOT GROUNDED
IN REALITY.

HOWEVER, NIKKI WORKED VERY HARD AND WAS FORTUNATE WITH THE TIMING. THE RIGHT
PROGRAM WAS IN PLACE FOR HER AT THE RIGHT TIME IN HER LIFE, AND NOW—WITH THE HELP OF
MANY OF THE FACTORS I DISCUSSED—
SHE IS ON THE PATH TO ACHIEVING HER GOALS: OF NOT ONLY GRADUATING FROM WESTERN, BUT
OF GETTING HER MASTERS DEGREE AND HER PH.D.

AND NIKKI—WANTS TO MAKE HER CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK.

AS WE TALK TODAY ABOUT THE NEXT STEPS IN THIS PROCESS TO FOSTERING SUCCESS, LET US TAKE
AWAY THE ONE THING THAT WILL MAKE THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE OF THEM ALL WITH OUR FOSTER
YOUTH AS THEY ATTAIN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE BENEFITS IT BRINGS:

MUCH LIKE JOHN SEITA, THE NAMESAKE OF THE PROGRAM WHO WAS ALSO A FOSTER CHILD AND
HOMELESS AT ONE POINT HIMSELF, IT WILL BE FOSTER YOUTH THEMSELVES WHO WILL BECOME
THE ULTIMATE MENTORS AND AMBASSADORS FOR THE GROWTH AND SUCCESS OF THIS ENDEAVOR
GOING FORWARD, AS THEY ACHIEVE ACADEMICALLY, AS THEY STABILIZE EMOTIONALLY, AS THEY
SET DOWN ROOTS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES AND BECOME MORE PRODUCTIVE CITIZENS, AND AS
THEY REACH OUT, AS ALUMNI OF THESE PROGRAMS, TO YOUNG PEOPLE JUST LIKE THEM—TO HELP
NURTURE AND GUIDE IN THE MONTHS AND YEARS GOING FORWARD.

THE FUNDING FROM BENEFACTORS IS IMPORTANT, NO QUESTION. THE POLICIES AND STATUTES ARE NOT TO BE UNDERSTATED, NOR ARE THE EFFORTS OF EVERYONE IN THIS ROOM TO THE GOALS ASPIRATIONS WE SHARE FOR THESE VULNERABLE CHILDREN AS THEY TRANSITION IN A CRITICAL TIME OF THEIR LIVES.

STILL---THE ULTIMATE SUCCESS WILL LIE WITHIN THE ABILITY OF FOSTER YOUTH THEMSELVES, ONCE SUPPORTED AND EMPOWERED, TO FACILITATE POSITIVE CHANGES AND OUTCOMES WITH THE NEXT GENERATION OF KIDS JUST LIKE THEM. EVERYTHING WE DO SHOULD ALWAYS BE MINDFUL OF THAT AND WE SHOULD DO EVERYTHING IN OUR POWER TO ENSURE NOTHING LESS.

FIRST STEPS. PROVIDING THE FOUNDATION OF WHERE WE NEEDED TO BE, BASED ON A PAST WHERE SUCCESS WAS NOT SO EASILY MEASURED, IF IT WAS AT ALL.

WE WILL LEAVE THIS ROOM IN A FEW MOMENTS, AND WE WILL RETURN HOME TO COUNTIES ALL ACROSS THIS STATE, AND MAYBE WE WILL SHARE THE FEELING, RIGHTFULLY SO-- THAT THE STAGE HAS BEEN SET.

BUT SET FOR WHAT, EXACTLY? AND WHERE WILL WE GO—COLLECTIVELY FROM HERE?

AT DHS, WE BELIEVE IT'S CRITICALLY IMPORTANT, RIGHT NOW--TO SUSTAIN THE MOMENTUM GOING FORWARD.

THIS WILL NOT BE A TIME FOR "SETTLING" FOR WHAT WE HAVE IN PLACE, FOR WHAT WE HAVE WORKED TOGETHER TO ACHIEVE, AS PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PARTNERS, INTERESTED IN IMPROVING THE LIVES OF THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN, ARE CURRENTLY OR WILL BE IN STATE CARE.

IF WE ARE SATISFIED WITH THE STATUS QUO---THEN TAKE A PICTURE OF IT. PLACE IT ON THE MANTEL. BECAUSE THAT IS AS GOOD AS IT'S EVER GOING TO BE.

IF THAT'S WHAT HAS MOTIVATED ALL OF US LEADING UP TO THIS SUMMIT—THEN SO BE IT. BUT I PUT IT TO YOU---THAT IS NOT WHERE WE WANT TO BE.

THAT'S SIMPLY WHERE WE ARE TODAY.

WE WILL NOT SETTLE FOR A MICHIGAN WHERE FOSTER CHILDREN HAVE ANY LESS CHANCE OF FURTHERING THEIR EDUCATION THAN ANY OTHER CHILD.

WE WILL NOT SETTLE FOR A MICHIGAN WHERE FOSTER CHILDREN FACE A BLEAKER FUTURE, AND ONE NOT OF THEIR OWN MAKING, WITHOUT EVERY EFFORT BEING EXPENDED TO HELPING REVERSE THAT OUTCOME.

IN SHORT, BOTH INDIVIDUALLY AND AS A GROUP---AND REPRESENTING MANY THOUSANDS OF OTHERS NOT PRESENT IN THIS ROOM.....WE WILL NOT SETTLE.

NOT UNTIL WE HAVE TAKEN ALL THE NECCESARY NEXT STEPS IN THE JOURNEY TOWARD SEEING THE POSITIVE OUTCOMES WE ALL DESIRE COME TO FRUITION.

IT WON'T BE EASY. IT NEVER IS.

BUT THE EFFORT IS WORTH IT.

SO ARE MICHIGAN'S CHILDREN, FOR THEIR FUTURE---WHICH REALLY MEANS -- OUR FUTURE. WE CLOSE TODAY WITH THE WORD I MENTIONED AT THE OUTSET---HOPE.

HOPE---COMBINED WITH A REDOUBLING OF OUR RESOLVE TO MAKE THIS HAPPEN, RIGHT NOW--- AND IN THE DAYS TO COME, WILL MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD.

TO EACH OF YOU-- FOR BEING A PART OF THIS YEARS SECOND ANNUAL SUMMIT--- AND FOR EVERYTHING YOU ALL DO IN FOSTERING SUCCESS---

THANK YOU.