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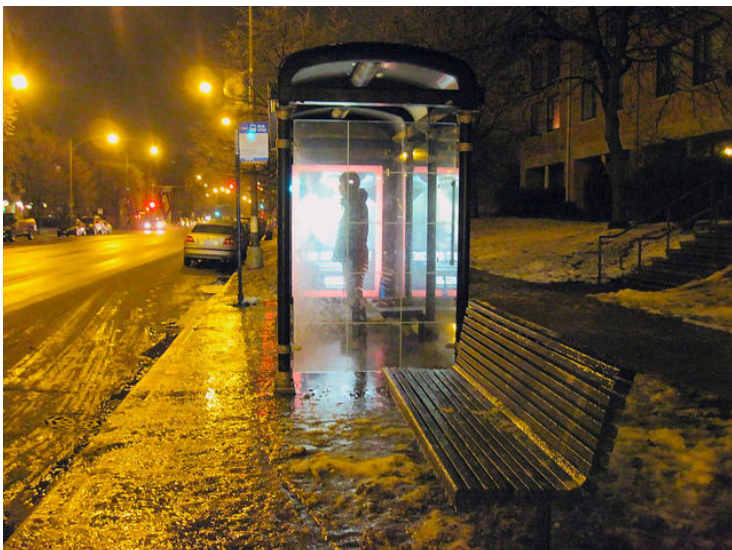
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For foster care kids, bus tickets don't solve transportation woes

By [BRITTANY BARTKOWIAK \(/PEOPLE/BRITTANY-BARTKOWIAK\)](#) • AUG 14, 2015

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Last week on State of Opportunity, we shared Alex's story (<http://stateofopportunity.michiganradio.org/post/heres-why-its-so-hard-get-your-drivers-license-while-foster-care>) about how hard it is for kids in foster care to get a car, let alone a driver's license.

Transportation isn't just an issue in rural areas of the state like Berrien County, where Alex was 20 miles away from everything. It can be a huge barrier for folks who live in the city, too - like Amber Thomas.

I met Thomas at the Wayne County KidSpeak Event (<http://www.michiganschildren.org/resources/learning-from-youth-and-families/#WSUKidSpeak>) in Detroit. The event provides young people the opportunity to address local, state, and federal decision makers and share what they would like to see done differently for kids in Michigan's foster care system.

When Thomas took the stand, she was wearing professional clothes - black dress pants and a bright red, striped sweater - and was prepared with notes to speak. She took no time at all to describe what she has consistently struggled with since leaving foster care: finding safe, reliable transportation.

“Bus tickets aren’t enough.”

Thomas is part of the Transition to Independence program (<http://www.tipwaynestate.org>), a campus based support program at Wayne State University that gives her free bus tickets. But that doesn’t always cut it. “Transportation is especially problematic for our students. Especially in Detroit, the public bus system is not the most reliable,” says TIP director Angelique Day (<https://socialwork.wayne.edu/faculty/bio.php?id=89126>). “If they're waiting at a bus stop for 2 hours, that means they end up missing class. Giving a bus card is not always the best answer for our students.”

Bus tickets definitely aren’t much help when Thomas has to leave the city for work and her internship through school. One of those opportunities is in West Bloomfield, and it’s a 6-hour round-trip on the bus. Thomas doesn’t have that kind of time. A cab is way out of her price range - it’s \$100. (She knows this because she took one - once - when she was running really late. Luckily, the cab driver cut her a deal.)

Lack of reliable transportation has put Thomas in danger on numerous occasions. One night, a group of men followed her and threatened her as she walked home. Another time, she was robbed by someone giving her a ride so she could pay her rent.

“I wanted to give up so many times.”

When Thomas doesn’t have reliable transportation, she is frequently late for class. This has not gone over well with her professors. She ended up getting all C’s last year because of it. This year, she made the Dean’s List because she finally saved up for a car.

Thomas actually saved up for a car twice. The first car she bought was stolen right outside of her Detroit apartment in the night. Her voice gets a little choked up when she talks about it. Today, she drives a Pontiac Sunfire, which took her months and months of savings. It’s not in great shape, but it gets her where she needs to be outside of town. Thomas still prefers to save money by walking when she can.

Thomas’ recommendations for improvement

Since the goal of KidSpeak events is to bring about action, Thomas had some clear recommendations for policymakers. She went into more detail when we talked after her testimony:

- **Connect youth with recommended, certified (and trustworthy) mechanics:** Thomas describes the mechanics she has been able to find as “shady.” She says one sold her a bad car in 2014 that “went out in just 3 weeks.”
- **Give subsidies or discounts on car insurance to foster care alumni:** With all the bills Thomas pays (rent, electric, groceries, gas, etc.), she could use all the help she can get.
- **Provide someone (safe) to call in the middle of the night if her car breaks down:** Especially when driving unreliable cars, breakdowns are more likely to happen.
- **Offer vehicle vouchers or a way to earn a vehicle through community service**
- **Start a transportation emergency fund:** For Thomas, transportation was key to her success. "You can't get out of poverty without transportation," she says.

Some funding does exist already

It's important to point out that there is some funding available through DHHS for transportation related expenses. Programs like Youth In Transition (<http://www.michigan.gov/fyit/0,1607,7-240-44524-161180--,00.html>), the Educational Training Voucher, (<https://mietv.lssm.org>) and the Fostering Futures scholarship (<http://www.michigan.gov/setwithmet/0,4666,7-237-61346-331411--,00.html>) provide funds that can be used toward buying a car and paying for car insurance.

There are some drawbacks though: the programs have different eligibility requirements that students might not qualify for, and funding cuts off when students reach a certain age or level of degree attainment. Even when students do receive the full funding - and many do - unexpected crises like Thomas experienced can easily wipe out what these kids have managed to save. Students need to be made aware of these programs to be able to take advantage of them, and that doesn't always happen. (<http://stateofopportunity.michiganradio.org/post/can-michigan-make-aging-out-foster-care-easier>)

After I left the KidSpeak event in my car, I noticed a familiar red striped sweater nearly two miles away from the building; Thomas was walking alone on the sidewalk. Not long after I merged on to the freeway, away from the city, it started to rain.

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