

Ohio Foster Youth Visit DC to Raise Foster Care Awareness

By Jessica Schneider, PCSAO Communications Specialist

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When Ohio foster youth Michael and Chyanne entered the statewide *My Voice, My Life, My Future* Art and Writing Contest this winter, they had no idea that their winning entries would take them to Washington D.C. to speak to eight members of Ohio's Congressional Coalition about foster care reform.

Michael, Chyanne and their caseworkers from Trumbull and Clark counties, respectively, joined young people from across the nation in D.C. last week to raise awareness about the need for foster care reform. The visit was in conjunction with leading national child welfare organizations which convened a series of Capitol Hill events to increase awareness of the need to improve outcomes for the nearly half a million children in our care.

The Pew Commission undertook the first-ever, comprehensive assessment of two key aspects of the foster care system: a federal financing structure that encourages an over-reliance on placement of children in foster care at the expense of other more permanent options for children who have been abused or neglected, and a court system that lacks sufficient tools, information, and accountability necessary to move children swiftly out of foster care and into permanent homes. Reform in these two areas, the Commission determined, will have far-reaching effects for children in foster care and is a critical first step to solving many other problems that plague the child welfare system.

The D.C. events included a Wednesday evening reception and art exhibition featuring readings and performances by Michael, Chyanne and other foster youth from across the country, and a Thursday morning roundtable discussion, attended by key members of Congress from both parties, which was dedicated to improving court oversight of foster care.

To give youth a voice in Ohio, PCSAO held four *My Voice, My Life, My Future* brown bag luncheons this month for judges and child welfare directors to listen to a panel of regional foster youth talk about their experience in foster care, especially in court. The *My Voice, My Life, My Future* events culminated in an overnight summit May 21-22 during which Ohio youth developed specific policy recommendations that they want to pursue. The next edition of the HeartBeat will feature the youth's recommendations and reactions to these events, as well as the next steps PCSAO will take to help these youth reach their goals.