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## Ex-foster kids getting help to vote

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Mona Perdue spent years in the Michigan foster care system. Neila Johnson has spent years as a political activist.

After years of watching the state struggle to do right by youths who age out of foster care unprepared for life, the duo is getting former foster youths more involved in elections.

The pair partnered to create Foster the Vote, an effort to organize former foster youths to advocate for themselves and to vote.

"I think of it as the AARP for the foster youth vote," Johnson said, referring to the former American Association of Retired Persons. "These are youth needing birth certificates and IDs. They need help with college educations. But instead of begging, they can advocate and go to their legislators and tell them, 'We vote!' "

## A chance to learn about candidates

Their vote announcement came a day after the State of Michigan agreed to settle a lawsuit filed on behalf of the state's foster children that will result in a \$250-million package of reforms that include more caseworkers, better health care and a single, 24-hour hotline for reporting abuse rather than call centers in every county.

Perdue, who came up with the idea, said Foster the Vote has conducted voter registration drives and plans to target the Detroit City Council and mayor's races, state legislative races and judicial races across Wayne County.

"I think that youth always need to have a voice in decisions that are being made about them," said Perdue, a junior social work student at Marygrove College.

Foster the Vote is to host a candidates forum at noon Oct. 25 at the downtown campus of the Wayne County Community College District, a co-sponsor of the event. The forum is for the estimated 1,700 former foster youths aged 18 to 30 who live in Wayne County, according to the group's estimates. Half of them are first-time voters, Johnson said.

The group is inviting the candidates and wants the youths to learn about them, and the candidates to prove they care.

"It's important for the judges to know that this program exists and see the reaction that youth have to them," Perdue said. "It's about accountability."

With the small margins of victory that decide elections in Wayne County judicial and city races, a big voting bloc could decide a race.

## Efforts hoped to spread

At the forum, the youths will hear candidates respond to their concerns, including whether foster youths under age 16 should have a say in their parents' rights being terminated. The group also plans to hold a mock election to demonstrate how easy it is to vote.

Perdue and Johnson hope the foster vote movement they've begun in Detroit will spread across Michigan and the country.

"We want everyone who has been in the child welfare system to become involved in the election process," Johnson said. "We want to give them a space to talk about their issues, give the candidates a space to answer those issues and show the youth that we can hold" elected officials "accountable."

*For information about Foster the Vote, call 313-505-8873. Join the conversation about this column at [freep.com/rochelleriley](http://freep.com/rochelleriley).*