

WALK a MILE Central Ohio



The Walk a Mile program serves as a bridge between policymakers and those whose voices are often unheard. Begun in Washington State in 1994, the program is rooted in the principle that greater personal understanding of issues by policymakers will lead to the development of sound public policy. To foster this greater personal understanding, the Walk a Mile program provides a supported and respectful opportunity for a unique educational experience in hands-on participatory democracy.

Walk a Mile is a national program that matches low-income people with policy-makers to “walk a mile in each other’s shoes”. This non-partisan program does not take a stance on policy, but rather, pairs experts with experts, (those who make the policies with those affected by the policies) to provide an educational opportunity for both. Policy makers who have participated in the past have said it has been one of the most meaningful experiences they have had to help them to understand and relate to the real issues of their lower-income constituents, and, as a result, have become more effective in their jobs. Low-income participants have said that it empowered them to have a voice in government and influence policy.

This year, Walk a Mile is excited to pilot the same concept with a new population. Policy makers in Central Ohio will be matched with young adults living in out of home care who are aging out of the system.

This new program will provide policymakers with an up-close and realistic opportunity to understand what growing up in the foster care system really means and the challenges that face youth who are aging out. Simultaneously, the experience will provide foster kids the opportunity to become engaged in the policy making process. For one month in November, policymakers and foster kids will maintain weekly contact with each other, share in at least one typical activity in each other’s lives, and policymakers will be asked to live on a minimum wage budget.

Originally called Walk a Mile in Your Sister’s Shoes, the Walk a Mile program began in Washington State in 1994. Walk a Mile has expanded beyond Washington State to 30 additional states and now this pilot project in Central Ohio in 2005.

The success of Walk a Mile Central Ohio is dependent on the endorsement of statewide organizations, the support of local organizations and the participation of policymakers and their foster youth constituents. Endorsing organizations will encourage policymakers’ support and lend credibility to the project. Local organizations will participate in training by Walk a Mile staff to assist in participant recruitment and provide continuous support. This initiative has great potential to increase dialogue about foster care issues and to encourage awareness of the relationship between policy, poverty, and foster care for all participants.