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KIDS WITHOUT FAMILY NEED EXTRA LEG-UP INTO ADULTHOOD

**Forum Column**

**By Miriam Aroni Krinsky**

*"Having a place to live is everything! You can't go to school or work or have a normal life if you don't have a place to stay."*

- Ebony, former foster youth.

Not many of us would sit down with our about-to-turn-18-year-old son or daughter and announce: "After your birthday, you're going to have to move out, find an apartment, a job to support yourself, transportation, insurance and whatever else you need. And the very anchors you have counted on to attend to your well being on a daily basis will no longer be a part of your life as you reach this critical moment of transition to adulthood."

Unthinkable! Yet for our most vulnerable youth - the abused and neglected children we undertake to raise when we bring them into foster care - this scenario plays out time and again as more than 20,000 youth "age out" of our foster care system every year, to struggle with adulthood on their own.

The average age of financial independence in America today has advanced to 26. Despite this national trend, we expect foster youth to attain financial and emotional independence by age 18, when many of them are abruptly turned out of the child welfare system. And when they falter, too often no one is there to provide support, guidance or a sympathetic ear.

The challenge of putting a roof over one's head, given these circumstances, is virtually insurmountable. Emancipated foster youth earn an average of \$6,000 per year, a number well below the national poverty level. The self-sufficiency standard for a single adult with no children in Los Angeles County is \$20,751 per year.

With the average cost of an apartment in Los Angeles more than \$1,000 a month, it is not surprising that an alarming number of former foster youth become homeless. Indeed, studies reflect that nearly a third of foster youth will become homeless at some time within the first year after they age out of our care; 65 percent of emancipating foster youth in 2000-01 needed safe and affordable housing at the time they left the child welfare system.

A recent survey of youth leaving foster care underscores the extent to which these teenagers are woefully unprepared for independent adult life. Only a third had drivers' licenses, fewer than four in 10 had at least \$250 in cash, and less than a quarter had dishes and utensils with which to set up housekeeping.

This year, about 5,000 youth who emancipate from California's foster care system will come face-to-face with these cold, hard realities - alone.

When our own children leave home to live independently, it is usually at a time of mutual choosing, and they know they will have a safety net if they are not successful in making ends meet. They won't end up on the street, because they can rely on their family, when all else fails, to look after them. We have helped them acquire the skills to find and take care of an apartment. We even co-sign their lease in many cases and often help to underwrite the initial requisite down payments.

As former foster youth Ebony said, "Just getting a place, finding someone to rent to you as a young person is hard. When you're coming out of the system, with its stigmas and stereotypes, that makes two strikes against you."

Faced with these many hurdles, it is not surprising that many former foster youth turn to their birth families. More than a third of the youth who age out of foster care go back to live with their biological family, even where the circumstances of abuse and neglect that precipitated their entry into foster care remain unchanged over the years.

This result reinforces the conclusion that we are doing far too little to provide better options for these youth, who cannot rely upon the stable adult anchors that are so important to other teenagers.

These are adolescents at a crossroads in their lives. They desperately need help in gaining skills that will be critical to achieving self-sufficiency, and they need to have a safe place to live while they study or work to attain that goal. Our failure to make that possible creates unintended tragedies in the lives of the very youth we seek to protect.

The result of our unrealistic expectations is exemplified by what some refer to as an "epidemic" of homelessness among former foster youth. A study conducted by the National Association of Social Workers reported that more than one in five youth in homeless shelters came directly from foster care, and more than one in four had been in the foster care system during the previous year. The General Accounting Office similarly found that between 25 percent and 40 percent of all foster youth become homeless.

Research also underscores the disheartening byproduct of this foster youth housing crisis - the lack of affordable and available housing is the primary barrier to emancipating youth finishing their education, getting and keeping jobs, finding access to adequate health care and making a successful transition into adulthood.

Some innovative programs attempt to fill this gap. A public-private partnership in Los Angeles between the

Department of Children and Family Services and United Friends of the Children created the Bridges to Independence transitional housing program.

This program provides housing for former foster youth, ages 18-21. Residents maintain their own apartment while receiving counseling, education and career assistance, and weekly life skills training in areas such as budgeting and meal preparation. The program has served more than 1,100 youth since its inception in 1996.

But a much broader approach is needed. At this time, the Transitional Housing Placement Program for Emancipated Foster/Probation Youth (commonly referred to as THP+) is the only dedicated state-funded program to provide housing and support services for youth leaving the foster care system.

In some of the models utilized, youth pay rent with tapering subsidies and receive assistance with items such as grocery vouchers, transportation, educational and vocational training so that they can gradually achieve self-sufficiency. While these models are encouraging, our state's investment in these programs is woefully inadequate.

The California Legislature is tackling the problem of how to refine and improve housing alternatives for transitioning youth by means of two bills currently under consideration. AB824, written by Assemblywoman Judy Chu, D-Monterey Park, extends the age of eligibility to allow newly emancipated foster youth until age 24 to access critical housing and support services through THP+.

Other federal departments that fund services for emancipated youth, such as the Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, already recognize the need to provide services for youth until age 24. AB824 thus aligns THP+ with existing federal funding services.

Positive results stemming from extending care beyond traditional age limits were documented by a study released last month by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. The Chapin Hall research found that allowing foster youth to remain in care beyond their 18th birthday conferred significant advantages during their transition to adulthood.

Youth who were able to stay in the foster care system were more likely to have better preparation for independent living, to continue their education, and to have access to health and mental health care services. They were also more likely to be working or in school than those no longer in care.

It is unrealistic to expect that, following a turbulent childhood, 18- or 19-year-old adolescents are prepared to cope successfully with the pressures of economic self-sufficiency, especially in a housing market shaped by skyrocketing costs.

SB436, introduced by Sen. Carole Migden, D-San Francisco, seeks to address another critical issue - the high-risk population of young parents leaving foster care. The bill puts in place key steps to address the challenges facing teenage parents by recognizing that their housing needs are particularly acute.

Approximately two-thirds of females discharged from foster care in California had at least one birth within five years of leaving care. A teenage parent with nowhere to live has far fewer options than other emancipating youth, and the stakes are even higher when homelessness can put at risk not simply the teenager but also that person's child.

It is clear that all emancipating youth need - and deserve - affordable, safe housing. We must give them a helping hand in obtaining it if they are to become self-sufficient and stable adults. That investment is the least we can do, as a community, in "parenting" our foster youths' transition to adulthood.

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