All Grown Up and Nowhere to Go

Girls Aging Out of Florida's Foster Care: A Panel Discussion

Saturday, September 15, 2012
2:00 PM - 4:00 PM

Keiser University College of Golf
Tom Watson Classroom
1860 Fountain View Blvd
Port St. Lucie, FL

Florida Commission
On the Status of Women

Fact Sheet 2012

The Aging Out Dilemma and Foster Care in Florida

WHAT IS THE AGING OUT DILEMMA?

Each year approximately 24,000 American teens turn 18 years old in foster care and head out into the world alone. At age 18, they become too old to remain in state custody and are emancipated to live independently, which is called "aging out." Many are still in high school, and they must find a job, a place to live and transportation. Although most are extremely eager to venture out on their own, very few have the resources, role models, and life skills necessary to be successful. When young people in foster care become legal adults, they are often given the choice to sink or swim without the safety net of a loving family to support and guide them. If they are unable to manage on their own and have no support system in place, many end up homeless, get involved with drugs and resort to a life of crime. This impacts government budgets and the quality of life in our communities.

WHO IS AGING OUT?

Youth in foster care are considered adults at the age of 18 and are released from state custody. Without parental guidance and mentoring, these young people are left to fend for themselves. They must find transportation, jobs, clothing, and lodging as an adult, usually while still enrolled in high school. Those who have spent their childhood in the foster care system usually have lived in several foster homes, switched schools, transferred to new cities, visited different therapists, or have different case workers. This unstable lifestyle makes it difficult to successfully manage in and adult world.

Aged out youth on average:
- Spend 6 years in the foster care system
- Move 1.4 times every year
- Live in more than 4 different placements

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER FOSTER CARE?

Without supportive relationships or positive role models, youth who leave foster care often struggle with homelessness, legal issues, and poverty. Within two years after foster care, six out of ten will be homeless, incarcerated, or dead. Most of these youth may not have graduated from high school and studies have shown that only two percent of Florida's foster care children graduate from college, despite being provided free tuition from the State. They do not have mentors or parental figures they can rely upon in the event of financial difficulties or challenges.

WHAT IS LACKING?

Essential assets that their peers rely on like:
- Having a driver's license
- Entry-level work experience
- Educational achievement
- Social problem solving ability to advance in complex institutions
- Role Models
- Finances to meet necessary needs

Statistics

In Florida, 1,365 children aged out of Foster Care without a family in 2008, according to the Department of Children and Families. Of those:

- 1 in 4 will be incarcerated within the first two years after they leave the system.
- More than 20% will become homeless at some point after age 18.
- Approx. 58% had a high school degree at age 19, compared to 87% of a national comparison group of non-foster youth.
- Less than 3% earn their college degree by the age of 25 compared to the general population of 28%

Florida's Foster Care System:
- A child is abused or neglected every 10 minutes.
- 50,239 children are victims of abuse or neglect each year.
- 18,753 children are in state care.
- 3,385 children are adopted from foster care each year.

Sources:

http://www.theledger.com/article/20090320/NEWS/903205101/template=printart

www.joe.org/joe/2008august/iw3.php

http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/state-data-repository/cits/2012/2012-florida-children-in-the-states.pdf

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The Aging Out Dilemma and Foster Care in Florida

RISK FACTORS FOR YOUTH LEAVING THE FOSTER SYSTEM

Homelessness
Many youth who aged out of foster care report being homeless at least once since their discharge from foster care services. At such a critical stage of the development when these young adults should be establishing themselves as independent members of society, most struggle with finding housing on their own. Many end up on the street or in homeless shelters for a significant periods, often persisting throughout their lives.

Employment & Job Training
Limited work histories and job training make it difficult to find employment, and many of these young adults work low-paying jobs making them vulnerable to poverty and increased difficulty establishing their own independence. Poor job preparation and limited skills training place these youth at a disadvantage in the job market. In a multi-state study of youth exiting the foster care system, three-fourths reported not getting any type of career counseling and over 50% reported no training in regards to job application or interviewing.

Health & Well-being
Upon leaving foster care, many youth face issues relating to their mental and physical well-being. Unexpected pregnancies are common. The instability of housing situations, limited life skills, the yearning for love and something to nurture, contribute to the early childbearing. This group is at an increased risk for poor individual and relational adjustment. Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, among others, puts them at greater risks for negative outcomes when they are released from care and have no support system in place.

Substance Use & Abuse
Foster care youth are at a higher than normal risk for substance use and abuse. In this population, illegal drugs are used for experimentation and peer pressure, self– medication due to lack of health care, and coping mechanisms for stress. Substance use in former foster care youth is high, often higher than that found in their peers who have no foster care history.

Areas For Change
- Education
- Training
- Housing options
- Continuation of mental & physical health care
- Programs that target specific needs to better prepare them for independence
- Greater number of support networks
- Employment assistance prior to discharge

What Determines Risk
Youth who report negative experiences had more foster care placements, fewer support networks, and less education or formal training.

Tough times often await youths aging out of foster care system

BYLINE: By DAVID CRARY, AP National Writer

SECTION: STATE AND REGIONAL

LENGTH: 1630 words

DATELINE: NEW YORK

Articulate and engaging, 20-year-old Shakhina Bellamy appears an unlikely fit in the ranks of New York City's homeless.

After hearing her story, told through tears and flashes of anger, her state of limbo seems an almost inevitable result of an adolescence spent bouncing through a dozen group homes and foster families as a ward of New York's child welfare agency.

She entered the system at 9 and walked away from it at 17.

"I didn't leave because I thought I was grown up I left because no one was helping me," she said.

Across the country, child welfare advocates are increasingly aware of the problems faced by young people like Bellamy 20,000 or so each year who "age out" of the foster care system with neither an adoptive nor a blood-relation family to support them. Scores of state and local initiatives are being launched to assist them; their plight may be addressed by the new Democratic majority in Congress.

Front-line child welfare workers say even the best new programs won't suffice without the hard work of engaging foster children one-on-one as they enter adolescence, soliciting their input and mentoring them in ways that replicate the best of a parent-child relationship. Bellamy agrees.

"You have to really talk to the kids, understand what they're going through and listen when they complain," she said. "If you don't, there are always going to be problems."

At present, youths are eligible to leave the foster care system when they turn 18. They often have the option of remaining in it voluntarily, but advocacy groups say many are pressured to move on or are not provided with good advice about how to adjust.

"As a society, we have failed young people aging out of foster care," asserts Lynne Echenberg of the Children's Aid Society, a private New York agency. "Despite conclusive research showing how vulnerable they are upon discharge from care, these young adults continue to exit the child welfare system to lives of uncertainty, pain, destitution and marginalization."

Studies by experts across the country show dismaying statistics for those who age out of foster care. Fewer than half complete high school; many have no jobs and no home except for a friend's couch to crash on. Their rates of arrests, health problems and welfare dependancy are far higher than for contemporaries with families of their own.

One potentially helpful step would be extend more foster-case protections from age 18 to age 21, as Rep. Danny Davis, D-Ill., has proposed. Many experts also are pushing for changes much earlier in the process, contending that foster children as young as 12 or 13 need extra help starting to prepare for the transition to adulthood.

"Foster care is a hypervigilant system focusing on safety and protection," said Robin Nixon of the National Foster Care Coalition. "These young people, as they move into later adolescence, don't get to do the normal right-of-passage activities that actually prepare kids for adulthood getting a driver's license, working. They're kept psychologically dependent on other

people making decisions."

Then, after an often disjointed adolescence, many leave the system at 18 unready for independence, Nixon said.

"For every other kid, the time they're allowed to be dependent on their family has continually extended, but, for what I think are financial reasons, we've not allowed that extension with foster kids," she said.

Across the country, much of the innovative work with older foster children is being done by private non-profits such as the Children's Aid Society. It recently opened a one-stop resource center in the Bronx, offering guidance on jobs, housing, health care, education and legal problems.

"When it works, the magic is not that it's all at one location," said the society's CEO, C. Warren Moses. "It works because the kids helped design it, plan it. ... We respect what they're thinking about."

Among the center's clients is Shakhina Bellamy; one of her latest projects there was to compile a resume for use in her job hunt.

Her odyssey through the foster care system came about because of her mother's on-again, off-again drug abuse. At one point eight years ago they were reunited, but ended up in a homeless shelter, and Bellamy was forced back into the system at 14 when her mother relapsed into drugs.

Bellamy spent the next three years moving among different group homes and foster homes, sometimes with Hispanic foster parents who spoke virtually no English. In one home, she said, she was locked in an attic at night by the foster mother; few of the adults overseeing her seemed to care about her future.

Bellamy pleaded with caseworkers for better living arrangements, but they said options were limited for a foster child her age. So at 17, she dropped out of the system going AWOL, as it is known among child-welfare agencies.

She managed to graduate from high school in Harlem but was one of the few in her class with no relatives attending commencement. She briefly tried college, but found it unmanageable without family or financial support to back her up.

She has had three jobs over the past four years the longest for four months and now is both jobless and without a permanent home, moving from spare bed to spare bed in apartments of friends and an aunt.

Though she has had to fend for herself, in far more challenging ways than most Americans her age, she doesn't consider herself to have any edge over them.

"If I was from a good home, maybe I could be in college now, or have a job," she said. "I wouldn't have to worry about having food. I'd be around people I'm used to, people I could fall back on."

Like Bellamy, 19-year-old John Jackson has no job or fixed address and says he received little mentoring while drifting through nine New York foster homes and group homes starting at age 5.

Of all the foster parents and social workers he encountered, he said there was only one adult who cared enough to get to know him and serve as a mentor.

No one else? Jackson shook his head. "I was raising myself," he said.

Jackson said he was moved so often changing schools each time that he constantly felt rootless and lonely. He gestured toward some of the other ex-foster children at the Bronx resource center.

"I call them my family," he said. "This is the first time I can say I have friends."

Acknowledging past problems, New York's Administration for Children's Services adopted a new plan last summer to improve prospects for the roughly 1,200 young people who age out of foster care in the city each year. Only about 20 percent are adopted or reunited with their biological families.

One noteworthy goal in the Preparing Youths for Adulthood plan is to ensure that each youth leaving foster care has at least one designated adult who they can rely on for guidance and support.

"We're talking to the young people to identify the important adults in their lives," said Dodd Terry, who oversees the agency's youth development office. "That's a significant shift actually incorporating them as planners in the process."

Other goals, Terry said, include closer examination of why foster children are moved from one home to another, and intensified efforts to track down and help young people like Bellamy who go AWOL.

"It's a huge task," Terry said. "We're engaging in a dialogue to say we must do better, and we're going to do better. We're looking at it as, 'What would we do if this was our child?'"

Several of the elements in New York City's new plan are being tried elsewhere. In Connecticut, for example, the Department of Children and Families urges foster children to stay in the system after turning 18, and offers financial support and training even to those who don't try college or vocational schools.

Those who do drop out have the option of coming back until age 21 though some might be required to obtain substance-abuse treatment first, said Brett Rayford, chief of the department's Bureau of Adolescent and Transitional Services.

Among Connecticut's potential success stories is Cameron Iacovelli, now 20. He was placed in foster care at age 12 by his mother, who despaired of being able to raise him properly after she lost her job as a nurse's aide.

After a year in state-run group homes, he was assigned to a foster mother in Bridgeport a woman who teaches special education at a local high school.

Initially so upset that he scarcely spoke for two weeks, Iacovelli gradually warmed to his foster mother and still lives with her, seven years later, under a policy in which the state keeps paying foster-care subsidies as long as he continues his education.

He graduated from high school, and is now studying for a computer career while working part-time in the mailroom of one of Bridgeport's leading law firms, Pullman & Comley.

Even Iacovelli strayed off the track, flunking out of his first year at community college

"I was kind of lonely," he said. "I'd go to a friend's house and watch TV or play video games all day. I felt the world hated me."

He credited a teenage friend for encouraging him to seek the help that eventually led to his job and computer studies. All along he had steady backing from social workers and his foster mother.

"I had most of the support I need but there's still that drive missing that comes from having family around," he said. "Sometimes it really sucks. You want to go home to the people you love, and you can't."

Gary Stangler of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, which helps foster children nationwide make the transition to adulthood, estimates that less than half of the youths aging out continue to get needed services after turning 18.

"By and large, it's not getting close to providing the kinds of supports we take for granted for kids with families," he said. "These kids crave families but most of them find themselves on their own."

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Help for Fla foster youth after they leave system

The Associated Press

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. -- State child welfare officials are overhauling a program that helps teens as they age out of foster care.

Department of Children and Families Secretary David Wilkins on Wednesday appointed 12 people to the newly reassembled Independent Living Services Advisory Council.

The state gives foster kids a stipend when they leave foster care to help them transition into adulthood. Those expenditures have grown by more than 70 percent since 2007, but positive outcomes have not increased dramatically.

About 6,000 youths are receiving services including case management, budgeting and employment assistance.

DCF is also seeking legislative changes to require mentors for these youth, increase their job opportunities and provide more accountability for the program's spending.

DCF recently surveyed more than 1,800 former foster youth. Only 4 percent had a full-time job.

jacksonville.com
The Florida Times-Union

Florida state agency is moving aggressively to protect foster children

Posted: August 10, 2012 - 3:58pm | Updated: August 11, 2012 - 2:20am

Regarding the recent letter "Our foster kids need better protection," we agree that the state and society have a special responsibility to foster children.

We appreciate University of North Florida department head Matthew Corrigan's comment that some private agencies providing services to foster children have performed "remarkably well." We also agree with him that more work is needed.

The Florida Department of Children and Families actively oversees the agencies that it contracts with to handle foster care and adoptions.

After DCF leadership in Jacksonville heard about incidents at a group foster home in Miami, we reviewed all of our group home policies in Northeast Florida. We checked every teenage female in our group homes to ensure that they were properly supervised.

DCF leadership made unannounced visits to six group homes to see how they were doing, and we will continue to do this. We've found that the appropriate procedures are in place. Family Support Services of North Florida's five-star rating system for group homes is highly effective.

Our group homes are not prisons. At times, our teenagers run away. That's why it is critical to have properly trained staff working with kids at these homes.

We agree that children in foster care need more support in their teenage years to properly transition into adulthood. The successful Independent Living program for older foster teens has inspired the innovative pre-Independent Living process that every foster teen in Jacksonville goes through.

We are working to ensure that foster children in group homes receive the same amount of guidance and financial support as children in other foster care settings. Children in group homes are usually there because we were not able to place them with foster parents. Many of them suffered abuse in their own homes before being brought into foster care.

DCF has launched a new foster parent initiative, "Fostering Florida's Future." The purpose is to improve the quality of foster homes and recruit hundreds of new foster parents.

We will provide better training and support for foster parents. You can find out more about this initiative at fosteringflorida.com.

All children in foster care should have the same level of care that you would want for your own children. DCF and its community-based care partners are working toward that goal.

David Abramowitz, Northeast regional director, Florida Department of Children and Families

Lee Kaywork, CEO,

Family Support Services of North Florida

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News Article – Life after Foster Care

January 17, 2011

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18 and on her own – Life after foster care

ORLANDO —

Jaleeca Dawkins is determined not to become a statistic.
She turned 18 in December, during her senior year of high school.
At first, she celebrated, but reality soon set in — Jaleeca was on her own.
"The day I turned 18, I got my first rent notice," she said.

Jaleeca was in foster care for nearly five years. After living in an abusive home, then group and foster homes, shelters, and finally transitional housing at 18, she said she finally has a support system helping her grow up.

"You pay rent, you get your own room, you have cable and stuff like that," she told me. "You have a curfew. It's a big help for kids that are about to move out into their own apartment, so when they move, they'll know what to expect."

She still has to cook, go grocery shopping and pay her bills, all while trying to finish high school.

Jaleeca, though, is not your normal foster child. She's doing very well, but many others in her shoes are not as lucky.

Tara Hormell, executive director of the Children's Home Society of Florida, said cutting foster kids off at 18 is setting them up for failure.
"Know how to budget wisely, make sure you pay your rent on time, go to work, make sure you show up on time – have all those skills that sometimes it takes even a normal youth to the age of way past 25 to learn," said Hormell. "They're expected to learn by 18, and it's not very realistic."
Here is the reality, according to the Children's Home Society:

- 33 percent of youth who age out of foster care will become homeless within three years.

- 60 percent will have a child within four years.
- 25 percent of men who age out of foster care will end up in jail or prison.

Jaleeca, who plans on becoming the first person in her family to graduate high school, has seen the faces of those statistics.
"Right now, one of my friends, she has two kids. She's 17, and she's behind in school," said Jaleeca.
But she also sees her future, which she says is success.
"It's up to me to do what I got to do," she said.

Groups in support of extending the foster care age to 21 said by reallocating funds and using federal dollars, it doesn't have to cost Florida taxpayers anything.

The Florida Department of Children and Families said it is working on legislation to change the age requirement. The agency just needs a lawmaker to sponsor it.
We are waiting to hear from Gov. Rick Scott on his position on the proposal.

In 2008, then-President George W. Bush signed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which allows states to extend the age of foster care to 19, 20 or 21.
The Children's Home Society of Florida says the law highlighted the need to improve outcomes for older youth in foster care.

Some other U.S. states have already extended the age.
In Illinois, for example, 58 percent of young adults who stayed in foster care until age 21 attended college.

According to a Chaplin Hall study, extending the foster care age would double the percentage of former foster youth who earn bachelor's degrees, from 10.2 percent to 20.4 percent.
The study said those who remain in care until age 21 are 65 percent less likely to be arrested, and 38 percent less likely to become pregnant shortly after aging out than those who age out at 18.

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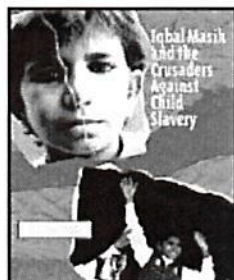
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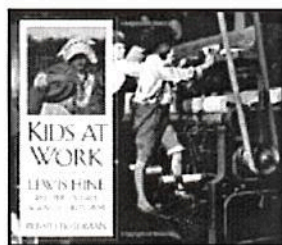
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To best understand how state performance changed over time (in this case four years), a calculation of the 2006 Ranking is provided for comparison with the 2012 RIGHT FOR KIDS RANKING. The 2006 Ranking also measures how a state's performance changed from 2003 to 2006.

What is most telling about the 2006 Rankings compared to the 2012 Rankings is how much states moved.

From the 2006 to the 2012 Rankings, 19 states moved more than 10 places (up or down). In fact, 14 states moved at least 15 places.

What does this mean? States can and do significantly change how well they serve abused and neglected kids in a very short amount of time. A child welfare system is not an immovable bureaucracy. It is a dynamic system and its performance can quickly and dramatically change.

On the other hand, this also indicates that top performing states must be vigilant and pro-active to preserve their good standing. In fact, only Arizona, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, and North Carolina were Top 10 States in both 2012 and 2006.

Other states saw dramatic improvement, including Florida (+12 places), Georgia (+18), Iowa (+23), Maryland (+17), Michigan (+18), New Jersey (+26), North Dakota (+28), and West Virginia (+23).

Some states performed poorly in 2006 and still performed poorly years later, like the District of Columbia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Nebraska, and Oregon.

Performance between 2006 and 2012 plummeted in Alabama (-28 places), California (-14), Delaware (-34, the largest drop), Mississippi (-17), Missouri (-19), Montana (-27), and Utah (-19).

STATE	2012		2006		MOVED 2006 TO 2012
	SCORE	RANK	SCORE	RANK	
Alabama	58.8	33	68.6	5	-28
Alaska	56.6	40	53.2	45	5
Arizona	70.3	6	66.5	9	3
Arkansas	57.8	37	57.2	32	-5
California	56.4	41	59	27	-14
Colorado	69.6	7	70.3	3	-4
Connecticut	57.9	36	60.1	24	-12
Delaware	57.3	38	69.4	4	-34
District of Columbia	40.9	51	52.2	46	-5
Florida	70.9	4	63.1	16	12
Georgia	66.1	12	57.5	30	18
Hawaii	68.2	9	72.3	2	-7
Idaho	78.9	1	68.2	6	5
Illinois	50	48	51.4	47	-1
Indiana	62.9	24	64.2	14	-10
Iowa	64.6	15	55.4	38	23
Kansas	61.4	30	56.6	33	3
Kentucky	62.9	23	63.3	15	-8
Louisiana	61.5	29	58.8	28	-1
Maine	62.7	25	55.4	39	14
Maryland	58.4	34	43.8	51	17
Massachusetts	42.3	50	53.6	44	-6
Michigan	63.1	22	55.3	40	18
Minnesota	63.4	21	64.9	11	-10
Mississippi	55.3	43	59.8	26	-17
Missouri	62.4	26	67.8	7	-19
Montana	52.6	46	62.2	19	-27
Nebraska	53.5	44	54.6	42	-2
Nevada	61.8	28	61.8	20	-8
New Hampshire	73.6	2	64.4	12	10
New Jersey	70.7	5	57.3	31	26
New Mexico	64.4	18	62.5	17	-1
New York	53.4	45	55.8	35	-10
North Carolina	73.1	3	67.1	8	5
North Dakota	68.9	8	55.7	36	28
Ohio	65.8	13	64.4	12	-1
Oklahoma	60.1	31	49.6	48	17
Oregon	48.9	49	49.5	49	0
Pennsylvania	64.5	16	61.3	22	6
Rhode Island	58	35	54.4	43	8
South Carolina	55.3	42	56.5	34	-8
South Dakota	51	47	54.8	41	-6
Tennessee	66.7	10	62.2	18	8
Texas	58.9	32	58.8	29	-3
Utah	63.9	20	72.5	1	-19
Vermont	56.9	39	48.4	50	11
Virginia	62.1	27	61.6	21	-6
Washington	64.1	19	61.1	23	4
West Virginia	65.4	14	55.5	37	23
Wisconsin	64.5	17	59.9	25	8
Wyoming	66.5	11	65.1	10	-1
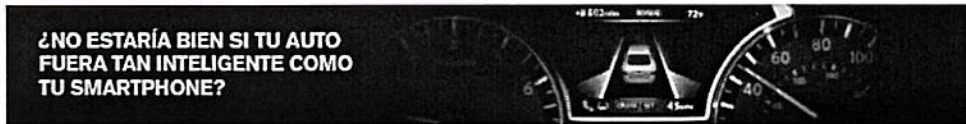
August 30, 2012

LATINO POLITICS
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The "Aging Out" Dilemma Plaguing the Foster Care System

Posted: 09/25/11 09:55 AM ET

Imagine that because you've been abused or neglected as a child, you've spent the first 21 years of your life separated from your biological family, bouncing from one foster home to another and changing schools every few years. At 21-years-old, you have never paid rent, bought your own groceries or managed your own expenses.

With an education that's spotty at best, and no family or other support systems in place, you're told that you're now an adult and responsible for functioning in the world on your own. Would you be able to do it?

That is precisely the situation facing many young adults who age out of our child welfare system. And while outgoing ACS Commissioner Mattingly did a tremendous job on many fronts, he would probably agree that the "aging out" population is one that still requires urgent attention. As new Commissioner Richter takes over the agency, this would be an excellent time to take a fresh look at how we serve - or fail - these young people.

While local statistics are hard to come by for a population no longer under the city's care, nationally, one in four of the 20,000 foster care youth who age out of the child welfare system each year are incarcerated within two years; one in five become homeless, only half graduate from high school. With more than 900 young people aging out in New York each year, these numbers reflect a real problem.

Under the current system, when young people in foster care turn 21, they have the rug pulled out from under them. They must sink or swim. But if they sink, we all pay a price. Unable to manage on their own, with none of the support systems in place that we all take for granted, all too often, they end up homeless, or turn to drugs and crime - all of which take a toll on government budgets and the quality of life in our communities.

Because of their life experiences some kids need more support than others - and they may need it for longer. A 21-year-old who has lived most of his life in either the child welfare system or a dysfunctional family setting is not at the same level emotionally or cognitively as other 21-year-olds. And as every parent knows, you can't set an arbitrary schedule for maturity.

As nervous as we may be to send our own children away to college, for example, we recognize that we could not have gotten them more ready simply by training them better or earlier. Most of the kids we're talking about are not going away to college; they may not have graduated high school. There are no teachers or mentors or parents they can call when run out of money or get into trouble. They're on their own and, for many of them, 21 is simply not old enough. And no amount of training or better programming by the child welfare system could have hastened their readiness. Because of their many pressing needs and challenges, they have not been the beneficiaries of structured or guided exposure to life experiences that naturally facilitates the maturation process.

What's the solution? First, we need more and better programs to prepare these kids for life on their own. Once they are on their own, they are likely to still need help with housing, jobs and enrolling in some form of academic or vocational higher education. They may also need social work or mental health assistance to deal with issues like parents coming out of prison or siblings with drug problems. For those kids, providing this kind of support until age 23 could mean the difference between a productive life and a life in the corrections system or a homeless shelter. These age appropriate programs that work beyond the system are a very good investment indeed.

At the same time, we need to make it clear that this support for young adults is temporary, and that the recipient must ultimately bear responsibility for his or her own success. These young people must stay enrolled in school and hold a job, even if part time. There must be high expectations, no free rides, and a path toward independence in a relatively short term.

For Hispanic youngsters today, we're seeing particular challenges, at least partly due to changing immigration trends. Many young immigrants, coming here from a variety of countries, do not have the generational, family and community support that has existed for previous immigrant groups. Whatever extended family they may have to fall back on may already be stretched thin. Combine lack of family with language barrier and overall cultural differences, and that child is at even greater risk.

Critics may argue that at some point we need to stop supporting these kids and cut them loose, and that 21 seems like a logical age. After all, we spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on each of these kids up until that point - When is enough enough? If release from the child welfare system is no more than a path toward a homeless shelter or a jail cell, what have we accomplished? If by creating short term programs to teach the necessary skills prior to turning 21 and by providing some additional support for a limited period of time afterwards, we can put that young adult on the path to a successful productive life. Isn't that worth it?

Foster care population drops for 6th straight year

By By DAVID CRARY and KELLI KENNEDY – Jul 30, 2012   0

NEW YORK (AP) — The number of U.S. children in foster care has dropped for the sixth straight year, falling to about 400,000 compared to more than 520,000 a decade ago, according to new federal figures demonstrating the staying power of reforms even amid economic turbulence.

The drop results primarily from a shift in the policies and practices of state and county child welfare agencies. Many have shortened stays in foster care, expedited adoptions and expanded preventive support for troubled families so more children avoid being removed from home in the first place.

The new figures released by the Department of Health and Human Services show there were 400,540 children in foster care as of Sept. 30. That's down from 406,412 a year earlier and from about 523,000 in 2002.

State by state, the picture was mixed — with some states extending dramatic declines and the numbers in other states rising.

In Pennsylvania, there were 14,161 children in foster care on Sept. 30, down from 15,346 a year earlier and from 21,500 in 2002. In New York, there were 21,473 children in foster care statewide on Dec. 31, down from 26,783 in September 2010.

Both states have been pursuing multiple programs to reduce the numbers — including increased placements of children with relatives in kinship care, greater investment in family-preservation programs so children can stay safely in their own homes, and speedier family reunification if a child is placed in foster care.

Florida implemented similar programs, and took advantage of a waiver that allowed broad flexibility in how it spends federal child-welfare funding.

"We don't want kids in foster care for any reason for too long," Erin Gillespie, spokeswoman for the Department of Children and Families, said Monday. "If they can go back home safely we want to get them home quickly and if not, we want to get them adopted."

Florida privatized its foster care system nearly a decade ago, contracting out casework and other services, which experts said contributed to a dip in the ranks of kids in care. Its foster care numbers dropped from about 29,000 in 2006 to under 20,000 for the 2011 fiscal year.

However, the figure has crept up in the past 18 months, from 18,240 in Jan. 2011 to 19,730 last month.

State officials said high profile child abuse cases have resulted in more calls to the state's abuse hotline and more abuse investigations. They also say substance abuse by parents is pushing more kids into foster care.

"In some areas as many as 70 percent of our investigations are related to prescription drug abuse," Gillespie said.

One of the most beleaguered child-welfare systems at present is Arizona's; the number of children in foster care there rose to 11,535 on Sept. 30 from 9,030 a year earlier. The state's child-protection agency has reported difficulties hiring and retaining qualified staff, and says the risk of child maltreatment has been heightened by economic stress on many families.

In Arizona's Pima County, a government office was converted into a children's shelter on a recent weekend because foster homes and group homes in the Tucson area were full, according to the Arizona Daily Star.

The numbers also rose in Georgia, from 7,023 in 2010 to 7,633 last year. Georgia's Division of Family and Children Services has been strained by budget cuts even as it copes with that increase and with a surge in child abuse and neglect cases.

Richard Wexler of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, which seeks to reduce the number of children unnecessarily placed in foster care, noted that the nationwide decline in foster

care numbers was smallest since 2006. He also noted that for the time since then, more children entered the system last year than exited from it.

Of the 245,260 children who left the system, 26,286 of them "aged out" without ties to their own parents and with no other home.

Wexler called this number "alarmingly high" and said it reflected "the reckless rush to termination of parental rights that dominated the system in the past."

The new data was contained in the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System report released annually by HHS's Administration for Children and Families.

The average length of stay in foster care has been reduced by more than 10 percent since 2002, according to the report. The mean stay is now 23.7 months.

Of the children in foster care as of Sept. 30, 52 percent were boys. Twenty-one percent were Hispanic, 27 percent black and 41 percent white; 104,236 of them were available for adoption.
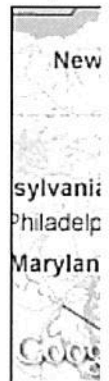
On the Net:

- New data from Administration for Children and Families: http://1.usa.gov/OuGTdF

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Bradenton Herald

AskGAL | Grandparents can retain visitation rights; state must protect children

Ask the GAL: Siblings suffer when split up in foster care

Published: August 29, 2012

By PAM HINDMAN / Special to the Herald

Q: What happens to children who are siblings when they are removed from their parents?

A: Keep in mind that the children are the victims of their parents' abuse, abandonment or neglect. Unfortunately, when children are removed for their protection, many come into care as a sibling group, or they already have a sibling in care. One study states that 70 percent of children in care also have a sibling in care. Manatee County is no exception, with many cases having sibling groups of four, five and six children.

Although all child welfare agencies agree that placing siblings together is preferable, when children come into care as a group it is often very difficult to place them in the same home. The shortage of foster homes means that very few homes will be able to take more than one or two siblings, and relatives are rarely prepared to take a large number of children into their home.

So the children are often split apart in order to provide them a bed.

Guardian ad Litem Rachel Bailey represents a sibling group of five who are placed in four different homes, from Arcadia to Sarasota. On her visits with the children, she says, they always want to know what their siblings are doing and how they are. The children are lonely and only visit every other week. When they do get visits, they often have to miss school for the children to be together. Sometimes it takes the transporter a whole day to coordinate a visit with the children and the parents.

Separating the very powerful bond of a sibling relationship when the children are under the extreme stress of removal can be disastrous for the children. Their siblings are their first peer group where they learn their social skills and how to negotiate conflict. It will most likely be the longest relationship they will have throughout their lifetime.

In families where parents are substance-abusing, the oldest sibling may be playing the parent role by providing the nurturing and support to the other children that the parents are unable to provide. In essence, at removal, the younger children lose the parents and the nurturer.

Separated siblings are more likely to experience placement disruptions and less likely to achieve reunification or adoption. It is essential for siblings to maintain regular contact to promote good

mental and physical health and to allow children to nurture their sibling relationships.

When children are able to be placed with their siblings, studies show a significantly higher rate of family reunification. A single placement can also reduce the workload of case managers who only have to visit one home and are not obligated to arrange for sibling visits between homes.

Foster parent communication with the child's family is also easier when only one foster family is involved. Having the children placed together can avoid the permanent separation of the children when one sibling is adopted by a caregiver and the other siblings, with other caregivers, are not.

Two foster homes being built in Palmetto by Guardian Angels of South West Florida will offer some much-anticipated relief by providing a few sibling groups the opportunity to be housed together.

Pam Hindman, director of the Guardian ad Litem program for the 12th Judicial Circuit, writes this weekly column for the Herald. Email Pam at askthegal@12gal.org, or write to her at Guardian ad Litem Program, 1051 Manatee Ave. W., Hensley Wing, Suite 330, Bradenton 34205.

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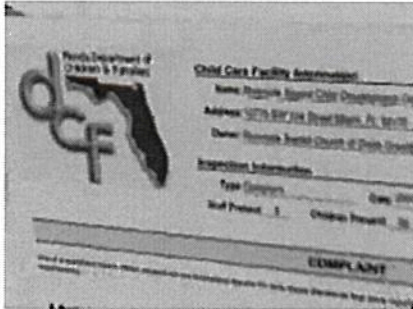
NEWS

State Looks To Recruit 1,200 New Foster Parents

July 12, 2012 12:36 PM

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TALLAHASSEE (AP) – The Sunshine State is looking for a few good men and women to help with children in need.

Okay, so they are looking for more than a few.

State child welfare authorities are looking to recruit approximately 1,200 more foster parents for nearly 20,000 children now in foster care across Florida.

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David Wilkins, Department of Children and Families, Foster Kids, Foster Parent Recuitment, Foster Parents

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Department of Children and Families Secretary David Wilkins said Thursday as part of a new plan to help with recruitment, agency wants to eliminate many of its rules and regulations that often hamper efforts to attract foster parents.

Wilkins said the new DCF program is designed to "let foster kids be kids" and give them quality foster home that can provide them with that opportunity while removing them from harm's way.

Four Miami men were charged last month with operating an underage prostitution ring by luring vulnerable foster girls into the sex trade with cell phones, clothing and attention they did not get elsewhere.

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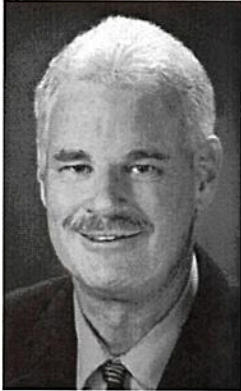Best Middle Eastern Food

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Local foster homes in too-short supply for traumatized kids
By MARK JONES,

Mark Jones is head of Community Partnership for Children, the nonprofit agency that oversees foster care in Volusia, Flagler and Putnam counties.

Last month, Daytona Beach hosted the 16th Annual Florida State Foster Adopt Parent Association Conference. During the event's press conference held on June 22, Department of Children and Families Secretary David Wilkins introduced a new initiative, "Fostering Florida's Future."

The initiative focuses on recruiting and licensing an additional 1,200 foster homes statewide to meet the current demand of children entering Florida's foster care system due to abuse and neglect.

The weekend-long event served not only to educate foster caregivers about important trends in child welfare, but was also a sobering reminder of the need for more foster homes to care for abused and neglected children in our state. Today, Florida has approximately 8,000 children residing in foster care, which includes children who live in foster homes and group homes. In addition, there are more than 20,000 children who have been removed from their families and reside with relatives and friends

Florida is in the midst of a major foster home recruitment effort. The focus of this effort is on a Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI). QPI has raised the bar for the foster care system, treating foster parents as professionals, who are team members and advocates for children. Foster parents are encouraged to act as parents to the children and make decisions for their best interest, as well as to participate in all aspects of the case. They are also charged with mentoring biological parents, which assists in reducing trauma to children and eases the transitions that foster children experience.

In our local area, which includes Volusia, Flagler and Putnam counties, we have 380 children in foster care. This represents a 15 percent increase from one year ago. We now have over 1,000 children living out of their homes covering our three-county area. Today, 600 of these children reside with relatives and an increasing number are being cared for by grandparents.

Locally, the increase in children entering foster care can be attributed to prescription drug abuse, which is a factor in approximately 75 percent of current cases. Prescription abuse locally and statewide hit its peak in mid 2011 and continues to be the greatest challenge in the child welfare system today.

The number of foster homes in the area has drastically decreased in recent years for various reasons. Many times, foster homes close after children reach permanency through adoption; other times, foster parents feel that they cannot meet the needs of the children and families involved in the child welfare system. Throughout the current fiscal year, Community Partnership for Children has had a net decrease of 30 foster homes.

This means that there currently are not enough foster homes to care for our children. At times, children from different families are placed in one home, or those children are placed in group homes where there are "house parents" and "staff" rather than a home with a mom and dad. Due to the lack of foster homes in our community, we currently have 28 children under the age of 12 placed in group-home settings. These are children who are already suffering from abuse and neglect. It only adds to to the trauma; they don't have a family to help them through the extremely tough situations they are facing.

We need the help of our community to meet our challenge. Our children need homes where they can be cared for, have their voices heard, and be nurtured. Foster care is a difficult and often traumatic transition for our children, and the key to their success is to provide them with caring adults in their community.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you are interested in becoming a foster parent, or in joining the effort to recruit foster parents in our area, please contact Lori Bainbridge, Community Partnership for Children's Foster Care Liaison, at Lori.Bainbridge@cbcvf.org or 386-254-3748.

The Miami Herald

Girl at another Florida foster home also lured into prostitution

By Carol Marbin Miller and Diana Moskovitz
cmarbin@MiamiHerald.com

Courtesy of the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office

Gregory Hodge

For thousands of foster children, the search for a permanent family is framed by a display in the "heart gallery," an annual showcase where heartwarming pictures of smiling, laughing and frolicking children beckon to prospective parents.

But A.B., a 16-year-old foster child from Jacksonville, was being sold with an entirely different set of photos. She wore high heels, a black skirt and a tight tank top that showed off her cleavage.

The caption for A.B.'s picture: "Experience me to know I will be your best!"

An ad in Backpage.com gushed that the girl's "hands will be your best asset," and added "$100 gift donation due upon arrival."

The Backpage photos were a tawdry milestone in A.B.'s descent into prostitution — documented as part of the federal prosecution of her alleged pimp, Gregory Goellet Hodge Jr., who, authorities say, recruited the girl near the foster-care group home where she lived.

The case, which is still pending, shares eerie similarities to the arrest last week of four Miami-Dade men who, police say, recruited foster children from a group home to work at a Homestead brothel.

The girls caught up in the Miami prostitution ring share the same foster-care agency as A.B.: the Children's Home Society of Florida.

Although the trafficking in underage girls into prostitution is not limited to kids in foster care, children's advocates say such children are particularly attractive targets to pimps: They are separated from family, often poorly supervised, crave attention and affection, and often run away from caregivers to the streets.

"You would have to be naive to think that pimps do not realize this," said Staca Shehan, director of case analysis for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Virginia. "This class of minors are vulnerable. It's not uncommon for foster children to run away. Once you run away, how do you support yourself? What do you do to find shelter and safety? What do you do to provide that for yourself?"

The investigation into the underage prostitution of foster children in Miami continues.

State Attorney Katherine Fernández Rundle said last week that her agency, together with police, intended to file additional charges in cases where men have lured young girls into the sex trade, and will vigorously pursue the girls' clients.

Sources told The Miami Herald last week that judges at Miami-Dade's Children's Courthouse who preside over child-welfare cases were given lists of girls in their divisions who police believe had been trafficking victims. The lists named several teenagers in addition to the four identified by their initials in last week's arrests.

Sources also told the newspaper that such trafficking was not limited to foster-care group homes operated by Children's Home Society.

"These girls all had very tragic, complicated pasts," said David Wilkins, secretary of the Department of Children & Families, which pays the group-home bills for foster children. "All these girls have seen the hard side of life."

When asked what he would say to people concerned about two such cases in less than 12 months at CHS facilities, President/CEO David Bundy said he would point to the company's years of experience and emphasize the troubled backgrounds of the teens they receive.

"It's a population of kids who, unfortunately, have been mistreated, do not have any good adult role models, and set up with bad actors who show them affection and convince them that they care about them, in some cases, and really take advantage of them," Bundy said.

In Jacksonville, a plea agreement filed in the Middle District of Florida outlined the accusations against Hodge and how he allegedly shopped around A.B. As part of the deal, Hodge would have pleaded to one count of sex trafficking a minor, which carried a minimum of 10 years in prison, the records said. Other counts would have been dropped.

But the deal didn't become final, and the case is ongoing. Hodge's lawyer declined to comment.

Here is how the agreement described the business and A.B.'s role:

A.B. was part of Hodge's massage business. His plan was simple: Recruit women willing to work for him, put advertisements out for massages and body rubs under the category of "Jacksonville Adult Entertainment," and split the money between him and the girls.

Some meetings involved massages, typically without clothes, A.B. told investigators.

And some involved sex.

In July, Hodge met A.B. and began recruiting her.

He found her walking near the Children's Home Society.

"That's where you live?" he asked her.

"Yeah," she replied, telling him she was 17, padding her real age by a year. She hoped he thought she was 18.

Hodge soon recruited her for his business.

Wilkins told The Miami Herald that the teen eventually became more than just an employee. Before A.B. left the group home, "she recruited a lot of the other girls in the home," he said.

Like a teenager in the Miami case, identified as S.S., A.B. sought out other girls to share her plight — a development that is not uncommon in human trafficking, Shehan said. "Once they've recruited a victim into their confidence, they will send her back into the foster-care system to recruit other victims," she said.

A.B. was with the Children's Home Society because of her involvement with the juvenile justice system. But soon after meeting Hodge, she was staying in his home, instead, the plea documents said. She was there about a month.

Her first advertisement went up July 14 on Backpage.com. He called her "Daisy" and lured in potential clients with the promise of a "private massage specialist."

The ad boasted about her willingness to travel, her professional session experience and how her hands were her best asset.

The pictures attached showed off her other assets. One showed the front of her body, one showed the side of her body, and the third showed her cleavage, the court records said. She wore heels, a short skirt and a tight tank top. They showed the many curves of her body, but all stopped before her chin. They never showed her face.

Her first job was a commercial sex act.

"I thought it was supposed to be a massage," A.B. recalled telling Hodge.

He replied, "Well, do whatever you have to do for the money."

The ad went up on Backpage.com, which has gotten scrutiny from across the country for hosting ads that, like with A.B., are veiled sales of girls for sex. It's owned by Village Voice Media Holdings LLC. Critics say the ads make business even easier for the pimps.

Liz McDougall, general counsel for Village Voice Media, said the company screens ads in its adult section twice before they go up, once by a computer and once by a person, and a third time after the ads are published looking for signs of illegal activity. Once they've been notified of a law enforcement investigation, they immediately cooperate, she said.

But they don't think removing the ads solves the problem, McDougall said. They believe the ads would only move to another company, one that might be less inclined to work with police or not required to because it's based overseas.

Critics say they don't believe Backpage.com does enough and remains a clearinghouse for trafficking.

In Jacksonville, A.B.'s ad was renewed five times in less than a month. The ad had a phone number, court records said, which rang the phone of a woman who worked for Hodge.

Like the other women, A.B. collected money from clients and gave it to Hodge, who handed her a cut. She told investigators she had about three clients a day. The girl only remembered some of her customers. Investigators tracked down one, living in a luxury condominium on the St. John's River in downtown Jacksonville called The Strand. Twice, she told agents, Hodge drove her there; she went to the customer's unit and had sex with him for money.

She got $140 each time, which she split with Hodge.

Afterward, she would call Hodge to pick her up.

Detectives later interviewed the client, who was not indicted, according to the plea agreement. They asked if he and "Daisy" had sex.

"It depends on your definition of sex," he told them, according to the documents.

The business eventually unraveled when Hodge decided to stiff his employee, sources told the newspaper.

A.B. left Hodge and found another pimp. Together with the new pimp, sources said, A.B. abducted Hodge and a young relative, tied him up and ransacked his house looking for money. The incident led to her arrest, and the discovery of Hodge's business.

In the end, A.B. retained some honor, sources said. She took from Hodge only the money she said he owed her.

Tallahassee•com

Fostering solutions

Some days, Crawfordville resident Heather Rosenberg thinks she's ready to stop navigating the seas of foster parenthood.

For three years, Rosenberg and her husband gave safe harbor to 13 youngsters, weathered dozens of placement phone calls and endured endless home visits by case workers.

Then, sunny skies make the turbulent times more than worthwhile.

"Watching a kid go back to his mom and dad; that's an 'Ah' moment," Rosenberg said. "You just helped heal a home; how awesome is that?"

On Thursday, Department of Children and Families Secretary David Wilkins announced an initiative to help families like the Rosenbergs care for kids temporarily taken from their families. The initiative, Fostering Florida's Future, is a marketing campaign to recruit 1,200 new foster families and promote less-restrictive parenting rules that did little to protect children and much to discourage participation by foster parents.

The Rosenbergs were one of 4,317 foster families in Florida in June, a 14 percent decline from the year before. The department recruited 1,000 families last year, but more left for a variety of reasons. Some adopted the kids they fostered. Others chose not to continue as foster

parents as they aged, Wilkins said.

"Fostering is not an easy job; I think anyone who is doing it will tell you it can be very stressful," he said. "And then there are some who end up adopting children and no longer have the room they used to have."

The initiative also promotes rules that allow foster parents to provide kids with a more-natural home setting, eliminating cumbersome bureaucracy and unreasonable paperwork.

In the past, the state required background checks on anyone who came in contact with children. That makes spontaneous or casual family social occasions a challenge. Play dates are less likely if fingerprints are required. Wilkins said he hoped foster parents would employ the same discretion they use with their own kids.

The initiative was announced in Tallahassee less than a month after police uncovered a human trafficking ring at a state-financed group home in Miami.
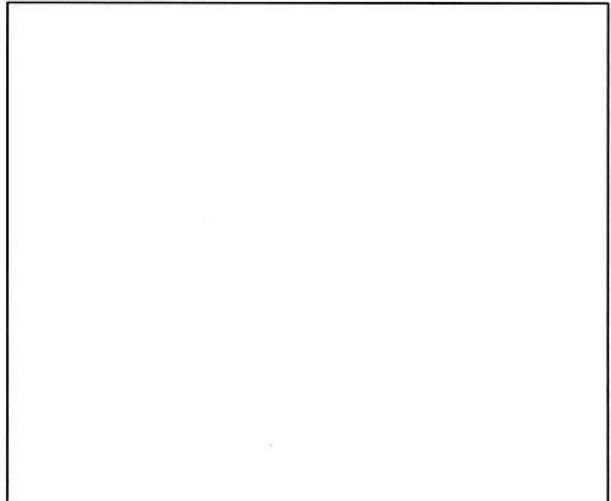
Tallahassee•com

"There will be mistakes, there will be problems and they will be reported to us," Wilkins said. "It's just like parents making mistakes with their own kids."

The group home where the trafficking ring was discovered was managed by one of 18 community-based organizations contracted with DCF to provide foster care.

As of June, there were 5,817 kids with foster families, and another 2,271 in group homes. That was a reduction from eight years ago, when 9,977 stayed with foster families and 3,199 were in group facilities.

DCF spokeswoman Erin Gillespie said the reduced number in foster care reflects a shift in priority to helping parents rather than removing children from their home. In 2006, the federal government — which funds $106 million of the foster program's $164 million budget — relaxed its restrictions on how the state could spend the money. Now, federal dollars may be spent on providing parents with treatment for mental illness or addiction and keeping the family together, Gillespie said.

The new foster-parenting initiative won't jettison all DCF's oversight.

Failed supervision of kids by caseworkers in the past also has led to legislation to address problems. In 2002, 4-year-old Rilya Wilson was discovered missing by Miami DCF workers who had not visited her for two years. An investigation into Rilya's disappearancerevealed the DCF workers falsified documents.

Wilkins said Rilya's disappearance led to a law requiring community-based organizations to visit foster kids each month. That requirement also will be met in the new initiative as caseworkers will collect more information from kids on issues such as school performance and social activities.

"What we're doing with this initiative is playing off that statute where, if you're going to go in there and take a picture of the child and make sure we go through all these things?" Wilkins said.

Leon County and 11 other counties' foster-family agency is Big Bend Community Based Care, which also has seen a decline in children staying with foster families. Numbers provided by the Tallahassee-based organization show 126 Leon County children are under licensed care away from parents or relatives, according to Big Bend Chief Executive Officer Mike Watkins.

The fewer kids under Big Bend's care does not mean the group is not also looking for
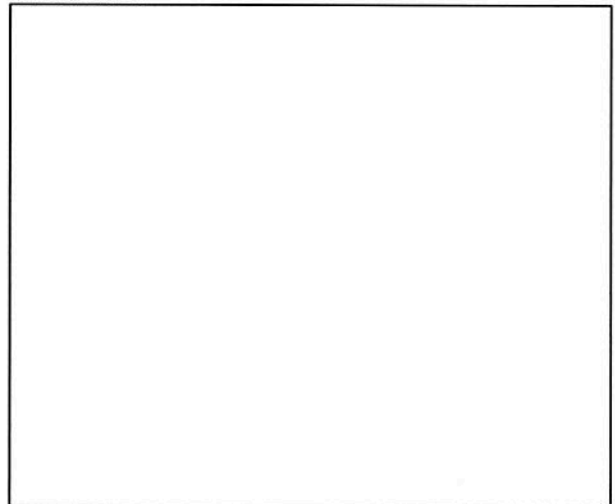
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more foster parents willing to help. New foster moms and dads could share the parenting burden by providing respite care for other foster parents or keeping siblings from being separated .

"We want to be able to raise the expectations of foster parents," Watkins said. "Raising that bar is a big deal."

Watkins also said providing a better parenting opportunity will nurture positive lifelong relationships. Such was the case for Rosenberg, who still keeps up with most of the kids she fostered. It also led to a priceless bond with her 2-year-old son, Warren, whom she adopted after taking him into her home as a foster child.

"They are my children while they are with me and from the moment they're placed with me to the moment I draw my last breath," Rosenberg said as Warren conceded in a game of hide-your-nose.

"I will think about them, I will love them and I will care about them."

By the numbers: FOSTER FAMILIES

On Thursday, the state Department of Children and Families launched another initiative to attract foster families.
Despite a recruitment drive last year, the number of families has declined over the past couple years.
December 2009:
5,226
June 2010:
4,997
December 2010:
4,729
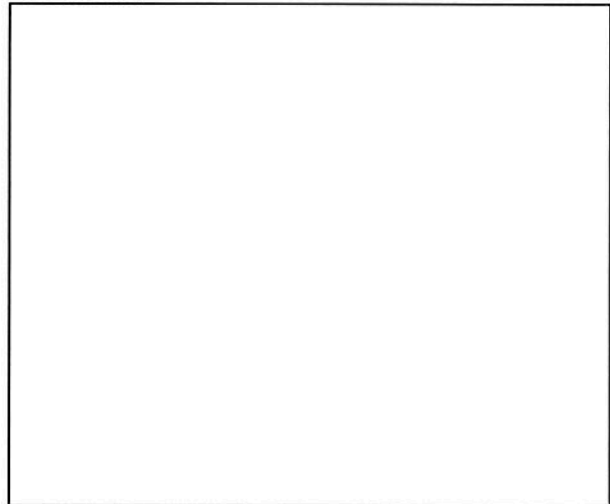June 2011:
4,561
December 2011:
4,386
June 2012:
4,317

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Statistics Are Grim for Teens Leaving Foster Care

By Eric Pera
THE LEDGER
Published: Friday, March 20, 2009 at 12:01 a.m.

LAKELAND | Florida and the nation could do a better job of helping teens coming out of foster care find their footing, critics say. This is especially true for those like Samantha Bailey and Jessica Upton, who had few - if any - close relatives or foster parents to assist in their transition to independent living.

Nationwide, more children are leaving foster care without a stable home, according to the Pew Charitable Trusts. Roughly 24,000 children who were 18 years old left the foster care system in 2005 with no family for support, an increase of 41 percent since 1998. The problem of "aging out" is of gigantic proportions. About 6,000 children end up homeless each year. And 1.3 million children live without homes, according to Do 1 Thing, an organization devoted to the problems of children who leave foster care and are considered "unadoptable."

In Florida, 1,365 children aged out without a family in 2008, including 56 in Polk, according to the state Department of Children & Families.

For these teens, the statistics are grim.

According to Pew:

One in four will be incarcerated within the first two years after they leave the system.

More than 20 percent will become homeless at some time after age 18.

Approximately 58 percent had a high school degree at age 19, compared to 87 percent of a national comparison group of non-foster youth.

Of youth who aged out of foster care and are older than 25, less than 3 percent earned their college degrees, compared with 28 percent of the general population.

The situation is exacerbated in communities, like Lakeland, which lack decent, affordable housing. The problem is so critical that the statewide Florida Baptist Children's Homes, whose headquarters are in Lakeland, has plans to shelter teens aging out of foster care.

"We should have a program developed by the end of the year (2009)," said Eron Green, Central Florida administrator of the Baptist agency, which provides a group-home setting for many foster kids. Few stay after their 18th birthday, he said, as most look forward to their independence.

But most are unable to afford decent housing, so a transitional shelter with minimal oversight makes sense, Green said.

He said he's looking at acquiring several homes near his agency's Lake Hunter campus that would be suitable for such a project. But that will require additional funding. "Nothing is a done deal but we see the tremendous need."

Finding decent housing is just one of the many problems confronting teenagers aging out of Florida's foster care system.

A statewide survey by the Florida Department of Children & Families released in 2007 found that a majority of 17-year-olds in its custody either believe they lack, or actually are lacking, the necessary skills and services needed to live on their own at 18.

Most of the youths surveyed said they had no bank account and no plan for developing skills beyond high school. Fewer than half, or 45 percent, were performing at or above their grade level. Nearly a third had been arrested at least once in the past year.

The data pretty much mirror a larger 2007 study by the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children citing how poorly foster teens fare upon aging out at 18 when compared to peers with access to foster care services to age 21.

Those in the younger group were less likely to be earning a living wage, more likely to have economic hardships, more likely to have had a child outside of wedlock and more likely to have had a brush with the law.

Illinois was singled out in the study as a leader in extending services to foster youths through age 21. Mark Courtney, a lead author of the Chapin study, told The Ledger that Washington, D.C., and metropolitan New York also have embraced the benefits of extending services to age 21.

Despite recent legislation that extends federal funding for states opting to extend services, most states don't bother, said Courtney, a professor of social welfare at the University of Washington.

"Government is a reluctant parent," he said. "State child-welfare institutions generally are overwhelmed. It's just an added obligation and state legislators are willing to leave that obligation to the side."

Florida does extend foster care beyond age 18 but it's strictly voluntary. The state's Independent Living Services program is open to foster youth ages 18 to 23. Children must have been in foster care at least six months prior to turning 18.

Services include a monthly stipend and assistance with housing and college.

Roy Miller, president of Children's Campaign Inc. in Tallahassee said more needs to be done.

"These children are woefully unprepared to be out on their own. They've been bounced around their own homes and bounced around the foster-care system," he said. "There needs to be some organized effort to make us aware of these kids aging out and asking people to step forward to help."

Help could be merely to serve as life coaches for foster teens, said Miller, whose nonprofit agency bills itself as a nonpartisan advocacy group devoted to child welfare as a legislative priority.

"We can't sit back and say it's up to the state to do it all," he said.

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This story appeared in print on page A7

Foster Care in America: A Snapshot

U.S. child population served in foster care during any one year	1%
Children served in foster care during 2004	Over 800,000
Children in foster care on September 30, 2004	518,000
Children in foster care who are children of color	58%
Children in foster care who are male	53%
Children exiting foster care who had been in care for one year or more	50%
Children exiting foster care who had been in care for three years or more	19%
Number of placement changes per year	1-2
Youth who age out of foster care each year	21,720

Source: Compiled by Casey Family Programs Research Services using statistics from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau.

Life After Foster Care

Children in foster care who have chronic medical problems	50%
Alumni (adults formerly in foster care) who experienced seven or more school changes, Kindergarten through Grade 12	65%
Alumni who completed high school (compared to the general population of 86%)	74%
Youth who aged out of foster care plan to attend college	70%
Alumni who attended college (compared to the general population of 51%)	37%
Alumni who completed a bachelor's degree (versus 28% for 25 to 34 year-olds in the general population)	3%
Alumni who were employed 12 to 18 months after aging out of care	52%

Source: Compiled by Casey Family Programs Research Services using national, regional or local studies of youth who formerly were in foster care.

Life After Foster Care

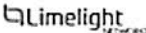|	
Alumni who became homeless for one day or more after aging out of care	25%
Alumni who volunteered in the community in the past year	42%
Alumni who reported positive involvement with their neighbors	80%

Source: Compiled by Casey Family Programs Research Services using national, regional or local studies of youth who formerly were in foster care.

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Posted: Thu 3:43 PM, Sep 15, 2011

Updated: Thu 4:06 PM, Sep 15, 2011

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Florida Foster Kids and College

The state will pay college tuition and housing costs for foster kids who age out of the system, but the financial help hasn't led to many success stories. Only three percent of folks aging out of Florida's foster care system graduate from college. We caught up with a few Floridians, fighting to not become statistics.

Danielle Johnson-Small is just a semester away from beating the odds. She grew up in the foster care system. In December she will earn her Associates degree. "Everything is possible when you have the will, the determination and you have a great support system."

Her story may not impress some. She's 23 and many of her peers already have their Bachelors degrees. But when you take into account her past filled with struggles and abuse, and the fact that only three percent of Florida's foster kids finish college, Danielle's journey can be seen in a new light.

Derrick Riggins has been down that road. Derrick was forced into foster care after his life was threatened when he was 13. "My dad put a knife to my stomach and threatened to kill me and I called the police and they came out and they were like, I can't stay here."

We first caught up with Derrick in 2008. Since then he's received a Masters degree from FSU, lobbied the state legislature on the behalf of foster kids and landed an internship in the White House. That's where we caught up with him by phone. "Education is the way out for a lot of these young people. If we don't promote it and encourage our youth to take advantage of the opportunities before them, then I think we're going to continue to have that cycle."

Staff Photo: Jason Braverman After getting laid off from her job, Shirley Tamplin returned to school and enrolled in the hotel, tourism and hospitality program at Gwinnett Tech. She graduated last week at the age of 68 and has no plans to retire.

Derrick plans to enroll in law school. He'd like to be governor some day. Danielle hopes to finish her degree at FSU. They're two of the lucky ones. Every year thousands of kids age out of the foster care system, many of them end up homeless.

Right now there are an estimated 20-thousand kids in Florida's foster care system. Once they reach 18, the state will pay their college tuition and give them money for living expenses. But just one and five take advantage of the offer.

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Network on Transitions to Adulthood
Policy Brief

April 2005, Issue 19

Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

Mark Courtney

Approximately 20,000 youth age out of foster care each year. With the exception of incarcerated youth, foster youth are the only group that is involuntarily separated from their families through government intervention. Although the primary purpose of this separation is to protect youth from harm by their caregivers, in removing them from their homes the state nevertheless assumes the responsibilities associated with parenting, including preparing them for independence. Although the state works to reunite children with their families, such reunions are not always possible. At the end of the day, then, it is government, acting as a parent, which decides when these 20,000 foster youth are ready to be on their own.

In his chapter in *On Your Own without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations*, edited by D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan, and Gretchen Ruth (forthcoming, University of Chicago Press), Mark Courtney reviews the policies and programs that support former foster care youth as they make their way into adulthood.[1] This brief summarizes his chapter, outlining how youth who have aged out of foster care fare, and the areas for improvement in the services that support them after they leave care.

Profile of Older Youth in Foster Care

Although several characteristics of older foster youth are unique, one pattern mirrors that of younger children: The majority are in care for a relatively short time. In a study of 12 states' foster care systems, most of the youth who were in foster care on their 16th birthday, for example, had entered care in the prior year, and only 10% had entered care as preteens.[2] Only about 7% of youth in out-of-home care in the United States in 2001, in fact, "aged out" of care; that is, they left care after the age of majority and were no longer wards of the state.[3]

However, that is where the similarities end. Older youth (aged 16–18) are more likely to be living in group homes or institutions than the overall foster care population—the least "family-like" settings. Youth in these settings are also less likely to form the kind of lasting relationships with responsible adults that will help them move toward independence, given that congregate care facilities are typically staffed by relatively young shift workers with high turnover. Further, the outcomes of former foster youth during their transition to adulthood are sobering. A recent study by Courtney, for example, found that 37% of foster youth aged 17–20 had not completed high school degree or received a GED. They more often suffer from mental health problems, they more often become involved in crime or are victims of crime, and they are more frequently homeless. Courtney found, for example, that 12% of the youth reported being homeless at least once since leaving care. Perhaps not surprisingly, given these statistics, former foster youth are less likely to be employed than their peers; they are more likely to rely on public assistance; and they earn, on average, too little to escape poverty. Their family life also suffers. They are more likely to have children outside of marriage; if they do marry, they are more likely to have marital problems. They are also more

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1 *On Your Own without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations*, edited by D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan, and Gretchen Ruth, is forthcoming, University of Chicago Press in fall 2005. The volume is a product of the Network on Transitions to Adulthood, funded by the John T. and Catherine D. MacArthur Foundation (www.transad.pop.upenn.edu).

2 F. Wulczyn and K Hislop, "Children in Substitute Care at Age 16: Selected Findings from Multistate Data Archive" (Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2001).

3 U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, *The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2001 Estimates as of March 2003* (Washington, DC: DHHS-ACF, 2003).

socially isolated than their peers. These troubling outcomes, whether the result of the foster care experience or other, related factors (such as poverty and turbulent family life), deserve attention from the public and from policymakers.

Support during the Transition to Adulthood

The main program that supports youth during this transition is the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, commonly known as the Chafee Act, after the late Senator John Chafee, an advocate for foster youth. The act provides $140 million in funding per year. The funding provides services (mental health services, life skills, mentoring, employment preparation, education, and others), stipends for housing, and extended Medicaid eligibility through age 21 at state option. The latter is especially valuable to foster youth, who often must contend with mental health issues arising from their traumatic pasts. Prior to the 1999 act, Medicaid was only available to former foster youth if they were eligible for other reasons (for example, they were poor young women with children), meaning that few were eligible. Given that former foster youth are less than half as likely to use mental health services after discharge from out-of-home care as they were while in care, this extension of Medicaid benefits is critical. The Chafee Act also provides states funding—$44.7 million in fiscal year 2004—for vouchers for education and training, including postsecondary training and education, to youth who have aged out of foster care or who have been adopted from the public foster care system after age 16.

On the surface, the package looks promising. However, only about two-fifths of eligible foster youth receive independent living services, and service availability varies widely between states and even between counties within states. Although the budget of $140 million is double that from prior programs, it still translates into at most about $1,400 per eligible youth per year, hardly enough to provide the supports envisioned. Even if states used all of the funds made available for housing, for example, they could only spend about $700 per youth per year. The Medicaid extensions, while valuable, are only in place in a handful of states. In addition, agencies providing services often try to reinvent the wheel, rather than looking to existing services and expertise. Many public agencies, for example, attempt to provide employment services to youth either directly or through private contracts, overlooking the existing workforce development agencies that have seasoned staff and longstanding relationships with local employers.

A Better Way

Perhaps the most important limitation of the current program is its target population: those who age out of foster care. As noted, only a few youth age out of foster care every year as a share of all those in care during their teens. A policy that focuses on these "emancipated" youth misses the many foster youth who are discharged from care before age 18 to their family of origin, usually a parent. These family ties often are severely strained, and many youth find themselves in need of another place to live or another caring adult in short order. In addition, these youth are some of the most vulnerable, given their longer turbulent family histories. The program also misses those who run away from foster care before they turn 18. This group is perhaps the most at-risk group on many levels, yet the majority of runaway youth simply fall through the cracks.

Rather than focusing only on youth who have aged out of care, Courtney suggests, policy should provide services to all youth who had spent time in care after age 16. After all, it is not just those who have left foster care who are at risk for poor outcomes. Given their clearly poorer outcomes, all older youth in care—not just those who have left the program—should warrant the attention of services and supports in helping them prepare for life on their own.

Mark Courtney is the director of the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

Based on Mark Courtney, "The Transition to Adulthood for Youth 'Aging Out' of the Foster Care System" in On Your Own without a Net: The Transitions to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations, edited by D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan, and Gretchen Ruth. University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2005.

In most states, the transition from foster care to the "real world" is abrupt: When a foster youth turns 18, he or she suddenly goes from being part of "the system" to being on his or her own. This transition can be rough.

On November 2, 2011, the Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research at the University of Pennsylvania hosted a public hearing on aging out of the foster care system. In Pennsylvania alone, around 1,000 youths age out of the foster care system each year, according to findings presented at the hearing. Nationally, that number jumps to approximately 20,000 to 25,000 per year. Child welfare advocates, practitioners, policymakers, researchers, nonprofit leaders, and former and current foster youths convened to discuss the issues related to aging out.

Pennsylvania Sen. LeAnna M. Washington, minority chair for the state senate's Aging & Youth Committee, who led and facilitated the hearing, says she doesn't believe "aging out" is a topic that's getting enough attention, which needs to change. "The Department of Public Welfare doesn't want to take responsibility for what's happening, and I believe our young people are falling through the cracks because of it," says Washington. "I'd like to see the Department of Human Services, the Department of Public Welfare, and the courts being more concerned with this issue and asking what can be done about it."

Emotional Connections

Some of the responsibility for preparing children to leave foster care must fall on foster parents, says Washington. "The issue [of aging out] needs to be addressed earlier on so that the foster child can start to prepare," she says. "Otherwise, when the child turns 18, they may come home from school and their foster mother might tell them, without the funding, they can't stay there any longer. They haven't been prepared for the aging out process and suddenly that security blanket is gone. What do they do? Many might turn to drugs or to the street. What do you do when suddenly you're lost in the atmosphere feeling like nobody cares about you or your well-being any longer?"

Debra Schilling Wolfe, MEd, executive director of the Field Center, says this lack of emotional connection—the sense of being cared about—may be one of the hardest aspects to handle for foster youths who are aging out of the system. "Imagine if you will that your birthday came and went and nobody even wished you a happy birthday," she says. "That's what many of these kids experience. The system provides them with physical and emotional support but only until they're 18—or in some states 21—and then they wash their hands of them. You can't pay somebody to care about you."

That's why Schilling Wolfe believes a solution lies in thinking outside the box of traditional services. "The efforts [in preparing youths] have historically been focused on skill building—how to budget money or buy food, for instance—but research shows that the most important predicator of success in youths who are aging out is not skills but relationships. Skills are important, but the youths who are most successful in aging out of foster care are those that have a caring adult in their life. There are mentorship programs that extend beyond the age of the system. These types of programs might be part of the solution—finding ways to connect and stay involved with youths even after they age out. We need to look for ways to build meaningful and long-lasting relationships."

Addressing Obstacles

The need for a smooth transition out of the foster care system was a key point raised at the hearing along with taking better care of youths while they're in foster care. The trauma of being in foster care must be addressed sooner. Youths who come from abusive families often have mental health issues that need to be dealt with early on.

At the hearing, Cindy Christian, MD, chair of child abuse prevention at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, a professor of pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine, and faculty director at the Field Center, shared the results of a state-of-the-art research study published in December 2010 in *Pediatrics*. She testified that child maltreatment is a public health problem with lifelong consequences for survivors. Maltreated children experience high rates of mental health and behavioral problems, and adult health outcomes for maltreated children are poor.

These findings highlight the need for the early prevention of child maltreatment and for aggressive treatment for maltreated children and families, but the barriers to providing quality medical care start with the healthcare system and extend much further.

"One of the most concerning issues is certainly healthcare," Schilling Wolfe says. "Children in foster care have special healthcare needs that are not always well addressed when they're young and don't get better in adulthood. These are the types of issues you would discuss with a primary care physician that knows your medical history and keeps a chart that includes all of the specialists you've seen or tests you've had done. But most foster care children don't have that 'medical home.' There is no coordination of their medical care. Their needs are not being followed or well attended. As a parent, that's one of your jobs—to monitor your child's healthcare. But for a foster child, that responsibility is often neglected. They aren't getting adequate medical support or monitoring."

It can also be difficult for aged-out foster youths to navigate the healthcare system or even find medical practices that will accept their insurance coverage. "All foster youths are Medicaid eligible, but just because they have their insurance card doesn't mean it will be accepted," says Richard James Gelles, PhD, dean and the Joanne and Raymond Welsh Chair of Child Welfare and Family Violence in the School of Social Policy & Practice as well as director of the Center for Research on Youth & Social Policy and codirector of the Field Center. "Take for instance the young women that get pregnant after aging out of the foster care system. Many OB-GYN practices and hospitals won't accept Medicaid, so their options are very limited. Then you also have the population that falls in the gap. This is the youth that gets a job as a shift worker at McDonald's and suddenly makes too much to receive Medicaid but not enough to get other healthcare coverage."

Better Preparation

Gelles believes the system needs to do a lot more—and do it a lot earlier—to help children who will eventually age out. "We need to reduce the amount of time children spend in foster care and reduce the number of placements they go through. We also need to come up with new ways that we can plan for these children to age out long before they reach that age. When I look through case files, I see a reluctance to engage with kids in their 13th and 14th years, but that's the time to be preparing them. Still, nothing in these old case files suggests to me that the child is at all ready to reach their 18th birthday and be on their own. That needs to change."

Improvements have come with some of the youngest foster kids in the system, but Gelles says it's the older youths who are in serious need of a policy or clinical solution. During the hearing, Dell Meriweather, deputy commissioner of children and youth for the Philadelphia Department of Human Services, reported that older youths make up 45% of the department's total population.

"Part of the impetus for this hearing came from our own students," says Gelles. "We have had a number of students who grew up in the foster care system start to put the pressure on the rest of us to give this issue some much-needed attention."

Washington says she sees a need for more hearings and certainly more attention on the issue of aging out of foster care. "We need to come up with some tangible, legislative ideas," she says. "And then we need to get this issue to the public. Bring in the youths that have aged out of foster care and let them continue to voice their concerns."

— *Lindsey Getz is a freelance writer based in Royersford, PA, and a frequent contributor to* **Social Work Today**.

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Report: Foster Kids Face Tough Times After Age 18
by PAM FESSLER

Audio Slideshow: Reflections On Aging Out

Credit: Melissa Lyttle for NPR

April 7, 2010   text size A A A

It's hard turning 18 — moving out, finding a job, going to college. But many foster children have to do it by themselves, without the lifeline to parents and home that helps many teens ease into independence.

A major report out Wednesday says that many former foster kids have a tough time out on their own. When they age out of the system, they're more likely than their peers to end up in jail, homeless or pregnant. They're also less likely to have a job or go to college.

Life can be a struggle for these young people, even with help from the government and nonprofit agencies.

An Abrupt Cutoff

Aging Out Of Foster Care
Read The Study

Take Josh Mendoza, a shy young man from Tampa, Fla., with soulful eyes and a hint of dark hair along his upper lip. He lived in 14 different group homes after he was removed from his mother's care more than two years ago because she used drugs.

But now he's just turned 18, and like 30,000 other foster teens this year, he's suddenly out on his own.

"This is my apartment," Mendoza says as he opens the door to a ground floor unit at an apartment complex in Tampa. The living room is empty except for a navy blue futon and a small TV. The white walls are bare. He has only been here for two weeks. There's food in the cupboard, but not a lot: some spaghetti, Cream of Wheat and cereal.

Living on your own is a little weird, says Mendoza. It's kind of lonely and a challenge, he says. His only cooking experience in foster care was heating soup in the microwave. He looks at a frying pan on top of his new stove. The bottom is covered with congealed fat.

"Yesterday, I was trying to cook, but I don't think it turned out too good," Mendoza says. "With the burgers, it kind of got burnt."

But unlike many foster care teens, Mendoza has been getting some help.

Nick Reschke is Mendoza's transition specialist, a kind of big brother/parent provided to foster youth in the Tampa area. He helped Mendoza find his apartment, sign the lease and move in.

"The day he turned 18, we went to pick up his check, went grocery shopping, went over a list of what he needs, what his budgets are," says Reschke, who also helped Mendoza pick up some donated furniture and supplies. "And then after that, Josh and I, we pretty much just cleaned the apartment up, wiped down the counters, wiped down the cabinets and set up his house. And that was his first night."

It was also Mendoza's 18th birthday.

"We have an abrupt cutoff, like most states," says Diane Zambito, who runs Connected by 25, a Tampa nonprofit that is trying to smooth the transition for former foster care youth. "We go from 'you're in foster care, where you may handle $10 a month' to 'you're responsible for everything.' "

Zambito says things have come a long way since 10 years ago, when some foster kids here turned 18, put their belongings in a plastic bag and were taken to the nearest homeless shelter because they had nowhere else to go. But she says it's still not enough.

"We need to offer something for these young people other than, 'Here's Option A: Fall off the cliff,' " she says.

Clinging To The Edge

The new study — from Chapin Hall, a policy research center at the University of Chicago — finds that those who age out of foster care are not exactly falling off a cliff, but they are desperately clinging to the edge.

Mark Courtney is with Partners for Our Children, a policy center at the University of Washington. Over the past eight years, Courtney and colleagues from Chapin Hall have been following the progress of more than 600 former foster kids.

Aging-Out Stats

For eight years, researchers have followed about 600 young adults who aged out of the child welfare systems in Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois. The report finds that at age 23 and 24, former foster youth are more likely than their peers to be:

Unemployed — Less than half were employed.

Homeless — Almost 25 percent had been homeless since exiting foster care.

Pregnant — More than 75 percent of young women had been pregnant since leaving foster care.

Convicted of a crime — Nearly 60 percent of young men had been convicted of a crime, and more than 80 percent had been arrested.

Uneducated — Only 6 percent had a 2- or 4-year degree.

"Many of them are faring poorly," says Courtney. "Less than half were employed at 23, 24. They're much less likely to have finished high school, less likely to be enrolled in college or have a college degree."

In fact, by age 24, only 6 percent have two- or four-year degrees. More than two-thirds of the young women have children. Nearly 60 percent of the males have been convicted of a crime. Almost a quarter were homeless at some point after leaving foster care.

"Those children are our children, the children of society, of the state," says Courtney. "I would argue that we have no business taking them into care and then keeping them until they're in the transition to adulthood, unless we're going to try to do a good job of that."

They're trying in Tampa.

Raising An Adult

Two weeks after his 18th birthday, Josh Mendoza meets his advisers at a GED program for those aging out of care.

"All right, so Josh, you know we do this once a month," says Sarah Hart, the program coordinator. "You've been in the hot seat before, so let's start by getting an update on your progress."

Hart is concerned because the first day Mendoza was on his own, in his new apartment, he didn't come to school.

"Why is that, Josh?" she asks.

Mendoza sheepishly explains that his alarm clock didn't go off and he missed his bus. He says he had no other way to get there. Hart responds as a parent might.

"My question is, did you call Mr. Mark or Miss Colette to let them know you weren't going to be here that day?" she asks.

"No," says Josh.

"OK. You know, those things are going to happen," Hart responds. "You've just turned 18, and you're getting adjusted to coming from a new place. I mean, I get all that. If that happens again, though, you have to call your teachers and let them know. That's part of being responsible."

Mendoza knows he can't afford to screw up. His $1,256 monthly stipend from the state is contingent on him staying in school.

"If I lose my check, I'm going to the street," he says. "And then I wouldn't know what to do, or who to ask, or who to turn to."

A Resilient Group

Researchers say former foster kids who have someone to rely on do better than those who don't. But right now, only a handful of states provide foster care beyond 18. While several other states are planning to do so in response to a new federal law, state budget problems could put a crimp in those plans. In Florida, there's even talk about cutting the stipend for former foster kids in half.

Enlarge   Melissa Lyttle for NPR

Katrena Wingo, who spent most of her life in foster care, kisses her son.

But Courtney says this is also a resilient group. By age 24, about half of those surveyed in his new study appear to be doing OK. Their lives have begun to stabilize.

Katrena Wingo of Tampa considers herself one of those people. At 24, she has a job and a place for her and her 3-year-old son, Ajai, to live. It's a tiny duplex, but with a yard big enough for her to play with him when she comes home from work.

But it's been a long haul getting here. Wingo entered foster care as an infant and stayed until her 18th birthday. After she aged out, she was OK for a while, but then she got pregnant. She stopped working and spent months moving from one friend's sofa to another.

"And at the time I wasn't going to school," she says. "So it was hard."

Eventually, with the help of friends, some family members and the nonprofit Connected by 25, she began to turn her life around. Wingo says perhaps the biggest eye opener was having a child of her own.

"It's just like, OK, you have another life in here that you brought into this world. And now everything that you do, everything that you own, everything that you spend, is not only yours or for you, it's for your child now. So he's your No. 1 priority," she says.

Wingo still depends on food stamps — and on her landlord to cut her some slack when the rent is due. But she's back in school trying to earn her degree. She hopes someday to become a counselor for troubled youth.

And Josh Mendoza? He says that if he gets his college degree, his goal is to run group homes.

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Locating and Engaging Youth after They Leave Foster Care

Experiences Fielding the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs

Michael R. Pergamit

- States are required to collect data on youth aging out of foster care and provide them to the National Youth in Transition Database.

- Youth aging out of foster care are difficult to trace, being highly mobile and even experiencing bouts of homelessness. Those most difficult to find are most likely in need of services.

- For states to successfully locate youth who have left foster care, they must plan ahead, employ a large set of tracking methods, establish rapport with the youth, and connect with youths' families.

The Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs demonstrated that most youth can be found after aging out of foster care, with 94 percent of a sample of 19-year-olds being located one year after leaving care.

ocating youth who have aged out of foster care has become a pressing policy concern. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (FCIA) required the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to develop a data collection system to (1) track the independent living services states provide to youth in foster care and (2) collect outcome measures for young people currently and formerly in foster care in order to assess each state's performance in operating their independent living programs. Toward that end, ACF has established a rule under 45 CFR Part 1356 requiring states to collect and provide certain information to

create the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). The NYTD requires states to collect information from youth currently and formerly in foster care at ages 17, 19, and 21. States began collecting data from 17-year-olds in October 2010.

Recent research efforts that have followed youth as they aged out of foster care have succeeded in finding and engaging youth. From these efforts, it is possible to consider some of the practices that will lead to high response rates in the NYTD. One such research effort is the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs, an evaluation of four programs funded under the

FCIA. This brief uses the sample of youths studied in the evaluation of Los Angeles's Life Skills Training (LST) program.

This brief begins with an overview of the Multi-Site Evaluation and information on the successes of the locating effort undertaken during this evaluation. The brief also includes information on the process for locating youth, methods and tools that can be used to track youth, and locations where youth are frequently found. The discussion concludes by offering lessons learned that could be used by states as part of their NYTD data collection.

The sample used in this brief is composed of 17-year-olds who were in out-of-home care, not in the probation system, placed in Los Angeles County, and deemed appropriate for engaging in a classroom-based program.[1] The LST sample includes 467 youth who were age 17 when interviewed at baseline in 2003–2004. Two annual follow-up interviews captured information from these youth at ages 18 and 19. This brief contains information on the 411 youths interviewed at the second follow-up, when approximately 82 percent had left care.

Ninety-minute interviews were conducted in person by professional interviewers using computer-assisted interviewing. For the second follow-up interviews, eight local interviewers staffed the project for most of the field period, with five interviewers completing most of the interviews. A local field manager worked with the L.A. Department of Child and Family Services and other local agencies and service providers to locate sample youth. Interviewed youth received $30 for completing the baseline interview and $50 for each of the two follow-up interviews.

Locating Rate for the LST Second Follow-Up

The Multi-Site Evaluation was very successful at locating and engaging youth after they left foster care, as shown in table 1. At the second follow-up, we located 439 (94 percent) of the 467 youths interviewed at the

baseline. Of these, we interviewed 411, for a retention rate of 88 percent.

Reaching this level of response was a complex task. Below, we outline the reasons for the difficulty in locating youth and the methods we used to overcome these challenges.

Youth Formerly in Foster Care Are Very Mobile

While in foster care, youth are highly mobile with frequent placement changes. In addition, some may run away from their placements, particularly as they approach emancipation age. In the LST sample, more than one in eight youths (12.9 percent) ran away from their placement at some time during their last year in foster care (table 2).

After youth leave care, their mobility continues. Those who moved since age 18 did so on average 2.3 times during the year. In our sample, only 40.1 percent of youth who had left care were living in the same place at age 19 as they were at age 18, and only 14.8 percent were living in the same place at age 19 as when they were 17.[2]

On top of this mobility, these youth have periods when they live in places where they are difficult to trace, including bouts of homelessness. At the second follow-up, approximately one-third (34.4 percent) of the

youth who were out of care had spent some time in the previous 12 months in difficult-to-trace locations, including staying with friends, in an abandoned building or on the street, in a car, in a homeless shelter, or in a hotel, motel, or Single Room Occupancy facility. Still other youth end up in the military or prison where it may be difficult to establish their whereabouts or make contact.

In sum, youth formerly in foster care constitute a very difficult group to find, whether as part of a research study or to ensure service provision. They may not form strong connections to their foster caregivers and may be distanced from their original family. Being young, they typically have not established the type of "paper

Table 1. Located Rate at Second Follow-Up

Interviewed	411	88%
Located, but not interviewed	28	6%
Total located	439	94%
Not located	28	6%
TOTAL BASELINE SAMPLE	467	100%

Table 2. Mobility among Youth Formerly in Foster Care in LST Sample

	Youth formerly in foster care
Living in same place as at age 18	40.1%
Living in same place as at age 17	14.8%
Ran away from care, last year in care	12.9%
Average number of moves since age 18	2.3
Lived in difficult-to-find locations past year	34.4%

trail" one creates in adulthood by having a rental history, paid utilities, established credit, and an employment history. Although they may have cell phones, they are typically on pre-paid plans that are frequently inactive. They also are unlikely to answer the phone and use minutes for people they don't know or care about (such as interviewers in a research study or workers in the child welfare agency). Unlocated youth are likely to be among the most in need. In unpublished analysis from the study, we found that the youth who took the longest time to locate were more likely to have been homeless, to have been incarcerated, and to have less social support, and were less likely to have health insurance.

Processes for Locating and Engaging Youth Leaving Foster Care

The Multi-Site Evaluation used a multi-pronged approach for locating youth after they left foster care. The following outlines the key steps in the process.

1. Connecting with youth while they are still in care. This is crucial and sets the stage for positive results. The development of our ability to track youth began during the initial interview. One of the most important things we stressed with inter-viewers was to develop a rapport with the youth. Young people need to feel they can trust the person interviewing them, think that the interview is worthwhile, and believe that the information they provide will be used appropriately. Many youth participate as a way of "giving back" and helping others who find themselves in fos-ter care. This rapport is best established at the beginning. The initial rapport has a great impact on the likelihood of locating and gaining cooperation from the youth in the future. It is easier to find someone who is willing to be found.

2. Collecting information on friends and family. At the end of the interview, we collected information that would help us

locate the youth in the future. Interviewers tried to get the youth to think about who might always know where they are or how to reach them; however, youth—particu-larly youth in foster care—can be unrealis-tic about such things. Since they do not yet have a concept of what their lives will be like after leaving care, they do not rec-ognize who they are likely to be in touch with. Thus, we guided them through a specific set of possible contacts. We asked youth for names, addresses, phone num-bers, and other contact information for biological parents, siblings, and other rela-tives (we stress to interviewers to ask about grandparents and other female relatives such as aunts). We also asked about their three best friends (who would know their whereabouts), as well as whether they had any plans to move or join the military. Many times, they did not know addresses or phone numbers; interviewers are trained to get as much specific informa-tion as possible, particularly to contact people who may have common names.

3. Collecting personal information. We collected the youths' driver's license or state ID numbers and social security numbers. Part of the consent process included gaining their permission to use these for the purpose of locating them in the future. During the latter part of our study, MySpace and Facebook began to be in wide use by young people. We instructed our interviewers to start find-ing out if the youths had a MySpace or Facebook page and a screen name. Although this did not lead us to many youths at that time, a survey being fielded today should expect to make use of these social networking sites.[3]

4. Maintaining contact with youth. At the end of the interview, youth were given the field manager's business card and asked to call the toll-free number if they moved. Approximately six months later,

a letter was sent to every young person reminding them that we would be returning to interview them and again providing the toll-free number. Finally, a letter was sent shortly before our inter-viewing period to alert the youth to our imminent return and again provide the toll-free number. As will be discussed later, many youth took advantage of the toll-free number and kept us informed of their status.

5. Incentives for participation. As noted, many youth participated in order to "give back." However, the payment received for participating clearly attracted some who otherwise might not have participated. Both types of incentives are important for high completion rates. Most youth want to be helpful, but need to understand why it is worthwhile to participate. Some youth will be indifferent and the payment will sway them, while others may only participate with a payment.

Methods for Finding Youth after They Leave Care

Successfully locating youth after they leave foster care requires a large set of tracking methods. We used many techniques to locate and contact sample young people. These included postal searches; database searches; reviews of case files and court records; outreach to parents, relatives, and friends; accessing public systems; working with shelters and the criminal justice system; and use of social network Internet sites. The discussion below highlights these various techniques.

Our first method was relying on the con-tact information that youth provided during the interview. From this source, we located 101 youths (table 3). In addition, many youth took advantage of the toll-free number. We received calls from 149 youths (approxi-mately one-third of the sample) providing us with current addresses. Although most of these callers (122 youths) informed us they

had not moved, knowing this saved considerable time and expense.

Another key source of information was the L.A. Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS). DCFS proved to be an important source of information, even for youths who had left care. We began by taking each youth's previous address and asking DCFS if they knew if there had been an address change. They were able to confirm the address was the same for 134 youths. DCFS staff next reviewed case files and provided information on relatives that led us to 62 more youths. Finally, they reviewed court records and discovered other information, such as relatives, that led to an additional 20 youths. In all, DCFS provided new or confirmed existing information on 236 youths or their relatives, although some of these are the same young people who provided accurate contact information during the interview or called the toll-free line.

Those youth who were not found through contact information or through DCFS proved to be the most difficult cases to follow. Through the many means described above, we found an additional 57 youths. Among these additional sources of information, the most useful was the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). When youth with driver's licenses move, they sometimes update their address with the DMV. Since they are not always timely about this update, we checked back with the DMV regularly. In all, we found 26 youths from updated DMV records. We found other youth through social service offices, the criminal justice system (including probation offices), homeless shelters, mentors, and social networking sites.

Youths' Locations

The 337 youths out of care we interviewed at the second follow-up were living in a variety of situations. (As noted, approximately 18 percent of the 411 interviewed were still in care.) Of those who were out of care, more than two in five (41.5 percent) were living with family, either their biological parents

Table 3. Sources of Information Leading to Finding Youth (not mutually exclusive)

Source	Number of youth found
From information provided by youth during interview	101
From youth calling toll-free number	149
Total from youth information	250
DCFS confirmed address	134
Case file information on relatives	62
Court record information on relatives	20
DCFS transitional housing	13
Independent living coordinators	7
Total from DCFS information	236
Other sources	57

or other relatives, thus demonstrating the importance of having contact information for relatives (table 4). Another two in five (37.1 percent) were living independently—that is on their own, with a spouse or boy/girlfriend, with other friends, or in a college dorm. Only 3.6 percent of those out of care were still living in a former foster home (not a relative).

Youth who are the most difficult to track are very important to our understanding of what happens to young people after leaving care. Roughly one-seventh (14 percent) of our second follow-up interviews were with youth in difficult to find or access locations (e.g., jail or prison, couch surfing or living with a friend's family, homeless, in Job Corps, or in adult residential care facilities). Through relatives and friends and by working with shelters, we were able to find and interview youth who were living with a friend's family, couch surfing, or homeless. Working with the criminal justice system, we interviewed six youths in jail or prison.

Lessons for Future Locating Efforts

Identifying how we found each youth is very informative. However, we can also examine information provided by the youth during the interview that gives us clues about how to design locating in the future. Table 5 summarizes characteristics of out-of-care youth at the second follow-up that could provide information on potential locating opportunities.

1. Commercial databases. Survey organizations typically use commercial databases to search for respondents. These databases are developed from a variety of sources, particularly from individuals' establishing credit or employment histories. Few of our respondents have established rental or utility payment histories by age 19. Approximately one-quarter (24.1 percent) of young people formerly in foster care had a credit card at age 19, and about one-half (51.0 percent) were employed at the time of the interview.[4] Thus, there is

Table 4. Living Arrangements at Time of Second Follow-Up for Youth Out of Care (N = 337)

Living arrangement	Percent (%)
Independent	37.1
With family (bio parents or other relatives)	41.5
Former foster home	3.6
Friend's family / couch surfing / homeless	6.5
Transitional housing	3.9
Jail / prison	1.8
Job Corps	0.9
Facility	4.7
TOTAL	100.0

some potential for finding youth formerly in foster care through these databases, but not much. The youth who can be found this way are likely easy to find in other ways. As these youth age, it is likely that these databases become more useful for locating them.

Perhaps more important, though, is using these databases to locate relatives. The contact information provided by the youth may have been incomplete or out of date by the time we attempted to locate them. Database searches on relatives proved very helpful in finding the relatives who then knew the location of the youth. Because some names are quite common, it is essential to gather as much information as possible from the youth in order to find the relative if the relative moves.

2. Government databases. Government databases provide opportunities to locate youth formerly in foster care, especially since many will find themselves using government services. Food stamps are a major source of support for youth after leaving care, with approximately one in five former LST youth (20.9 percent) having received food stamps. Youth also participated in SSI (8.5 percent), public housing (8.0 percent), and Section 8 housing (6.8 percent).[5] Thus, databases for these programs may also lead to youth. TANF and WIC become important sources of support for youth who become parents.[6] In each of these cases, the youth receives an ongoing benefit, which makes it more likely that the address information is current.

Other government databases can be useful, but may not have current information or may not provide easy access. For example, nearly two-thirds of out-of-care LST youth (63.7 percent) enrolled in Medicaid. Since Medicaid provides eligibility for health care but does not provide an ongoing benefit, contact information may not be up to date. As

more states adopt Medicaid coverage for youth after leaving care, this may become a more useful source of locating information.

3. Department of Motor Vehicles identification. We discussed earlier that the DMV was an important source of information about youths' locations. The Multi-Site Evaluation data indicate the potential value of the DMV as a source, as virtually our entire sample had either a driver's license (34.2 percent) or a state-issued identification card (54.5 percent) at age 19. However, the currency of the address depends on the youth updating the DMV after a move, something that many may not do.

4. Criminal justice system involvement. Unfortunately, many youth who have been in foster care come into contact with the criminal justice system. At age 19, one in ten (9.9 percent) of youth in the sample who were out of care had been charged with a crime in the past 12 months; 5.4 percent had been incarcerated in the past 12 months. These are likely underestimates, as some of the youth we did not locate may very well have been in jail or prison. Gaining access to criminal justice records as well as gaining access to a prisoner can be difficult, but it is important for locating youth after they leave care. Starting the process early is critical to have access arranged in a timely fashion.

5. Education systems. Some youth continue with their education after leaving foster care, although at rates much lower than the population as a whole. Most students can be located through school and college data sources, though access to these records may be limited. Three in ten youth in our sample (29.3 percent) who had left care were enrolled in school at the second follow-up. A small percentage (5.3 percent) was finishing high school.

Table 5. Characteristics of Youth Who've Exited Foster Care at Second Follow-Up, Indicating Potential Tracing Opportunities

	Percent (%)
Established credit or employment	
Have a credit card	24.1
Employed at interview date	50.1
Receipt of public assistance	
Food Stamps	20.9
SSI	8.5
Public housing	8.0
Section 8 housing	6.8
Medicaid	63.7
DMV identification	
License	34.2
State ID	54.5
Criminal justice involvement	
Charged by police past 12 months	9.9
Incarcerated past 12 months	5.4
Enrollment in education	
High school	5.3
Two-year college	16.9
Four-year college	7.1
Contact with relative at least once per month	
Bio mom	49.6
Bio dad	26.7
Grandparents	48.4
Other relatives	55.8
Siblings	75.4
Other characteristics	
Have a sibling in care	34.4
Stayed at a relative's past 12 months (may not be current)	59.8

One-sixth (16.9 percent) were enrolled in a two-year college and 7.1 percent were enrolled in a four-year college. Most students do not go far away for college and two-year colleges are in the local community, making these youth potentially easy to locate. The National Student Clearinghouse, as well as local sources, can be helpful in locating youth who have enrolled in postsecondary education since leaving foster care.

6. Family. Perhaps the most important source of information for locating youth formerly in foster care is their families. Although some youth detach from family connections, a significant proportion have contact with one or more family members on a regular basis. As seen above, over 40 percent of the youth formerly in care whom we interviewed at age 19 were living with relatives. An additional one-fifth reported having stayed with a relative at some time in the previous 12 months. In total, about 60 percent were either living with relatives currently or had done so at some point in the past 12 months.

To get a sense of how useful relatives might be for locating youth, we find that for young people who had left care, half (49.6 percent) had been in contact with their biological mother at least once per month. A similar percentage (48.4 percent) had been in contact with a grandparent at least once per month. Approximately one-quarter (26.7 percent) had been in contact with their biological father at least once per month, and over half (55.8 percent) had been in contact with other relatives at least once per month. Siblings are also very important contacts for youth who leave foster care. Three-quarters (75.4 percent) of youth formerly in care had been in contact with a sibling at least once per month. One-third (34.4 percent) had a sibling still in foster care, making access to contact information quite easy.

Discussion

Locating and engaging youth after they leave foster care can prove quite challenging. However, the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs demonstrated that most can be found, with 94 percent of a sample of 19-year-olds being located one year after leaving care. The youth survey component of the evaluation indicates several important lessons for successfully finding and engaging youth after they leave care.

Plan the process up front: Once youth leave care, it can prove difficult to find them if a process has not been planned. Planning will help ensure you acquire useful information from the youth before they leave care, establish procedures for accessing files and records, obtain consent from the youth for accessing other administrative data, and arrange cooperative agreements with other agencies.

Establish rapport: Make future contact part of a process that begins before they leave care. Make the youth aware that you will be looking for them and make them interested in being found. This could be incorporated as part of the permanency planning process or the transition process. Collect contact information before the young people leave care. Although many youth won't know where they will be or who may know where to find them, and they likely have unrealistic expectations about their future, it is critical to gather whatever information they can provide and to guide them to think about people and places that don't occur to them. Collecting contact information on family and friends of family dovetails well with ongoing permanency planning.

Obtain consent from the youth to contact others: In addition to collecting contact information from the youth and gaining their consent to use that information to locate them in the future, it is important to obtain their consent to contact other agencies and access records that might prove helpful in finding them.

Keep in touch with youth: Keeping in touch with these youth, even in such small ways as a newsletter or a birthday card, will make them feel that someone cares. Furthermore, mailings can provide indicators of movement from returned mail or forwarded addresses. Consider developing a means of contact through social networking sites. The use of these sites provides a more stable means of contact than either mail or phone for disadvantaged and itinerant youths.

Provide multiple means for youths to keep in touch: The evaluation demonstrated that many youths will call toll-free numbers. They are also likely to respond using other communication means if given the opportunity. It is important that toll-free lines, e-mail addresses, or social networking pages be monitored and timely responses provided. Failure to do so will create or exacerbate mistrust.

Make use of as many locating methods as possible: Although certain locating methods find significant numbers of youth, those youth most in need of help may require considerable detective work. Begin by making use of information available in case files and court records. Over the years a youth is in care, numerous clues may accumulate in those files that indicate where a youth may be located, or provide a means to locate the youth.

Develop cooperative relationships with government agencies that may be in a position to provide information: Agencies that provide social services, cash payments, non-cash benefits, youth training programs (e.g., JobCorps), schools, and those in the criminal justice system can provide information or access to young adults involved with their programs or systems.

Reach out to parents and relatives: Many youth maintain contact with relatives, a high percentage at some point living with relatives. Relatives may be able to provide the youth's current location or may be a conduit to getting messages to the youth.

Provide an incentive for the youth to want to be found: In the Multi-Site Evaluation, we paid $50 for follow-up interviews. Cash payments are very effective, but are not always allowable or affordable. Nor may they be the best option for agencies trying to offer services. In the absence of cash payments, it is imperative to identify some other benefit that will entice youth to want to be found. Multiple types of benefits may be necessary to appeal to different types of youths—for example, college students may respond to different benefits than will homeless youths. ▪

Notes

1. L.A. Department of Child and Family Services policy deemed inappropriate those youth who were physically or mentally unable to benefit from classroom-based services.

2. Of those youth interviewed at both follow-up interviews.

3. Social networking sites were a new phenomenon when we conducted the study, with MySpace the dominant site for young people. Today, Facebook would provide much more opportunity for keeping in contact with youth.

4. A larger number of respondents had been employed at some point, but were not employed at the time of the interview. Only current employment provides current locating information.

5. However, the public housing or Section 8 housing may not be in the youth's name.

6. An error in the questionnaire caused an underestimate of the number of youth receiving TANF or WIC. What was captured indicates at least 6.5 percent of those formerly in foster care received TANF and 11.6 percent received WIC.

Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs

This brief uses data collected as part of the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs. Mandated by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, the study evaluated the effectiveness of four programs aimed at preparing youth in foster care to live independently after leaving care. Youths were randomly assigned to either treatment or control conditions in each study site. In order to explore the challenges of locating and engaging youth who have left foster care, this brief draws on the entire group of young people at one evaluation site in Los Angeles, California.

For more information on the evaluation, please see http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/chafee/index.html.

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