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## House passes foster care transition funding

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Mar 11, 2010



How many times a month do you call your parents?

In your 20s, those calls tend to seek guidance or a little financial help -- wondering how to cook a meatloaf, asking for a hand changing a flat tire, looking for advice about how to make a paycheck cover the monthly bills.

Kids who turn 18 and are thrust out of Alaska's foster care system don't always have an adult to turn to. Without that support, almost 30 percent end up in jail within a few years, nearly 40 percent are homeless at some point, and almost 75 percent end up on public assistance.

After years of advocacy by Rep. Les Gara, Alaska lawmakers are investing about \$715,000 this year to provide a smoother transition for young people from the foster care system into life on their own.

The House approved an operating budget on Thursday that includes those funds, most of which will address the unmet needs of kids that "age out" of the system.

Amanda Metivier, a former foster child, is now the statewide coordinator for an advocacy group she founded, Facing Foster Care. She lauded the broad bipartisan support for the \$715,000 amendment Gara brought before his colleagues on the House Finance Committee.

"Republicans and Democrats, my sense is that everybody really cares a lot," Metivier said. "Lawmakers -- they're starting to understand that these are their children. They're really stepping up to the plate as a parent."

The spending now faces scrutiny in the Senate, but foster youth have allies there as well. Sens. Bettye Davis and Johnny Ellis, both Anchorage Democrats, have advocated for foster care funding for decades.

Metivier founded Faces of Foster Care at age 19 to provide training for social workers and foster parents and advance policy issues. She and some of the group's 300 members -- all foster youth between 15 and 24 years old -- lobbied lawmakers in Juneau earlier this session.

She's optimistic the funding will stick.

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### Where the money goes:

The \$715,000 in the House-approved operating budget boosts funding for foster care under the Office of Child Services. If approved by the Senate and signed by Gov. Sean Parnell, the money will help with education, housing and life skills for youth who hit age 18 and are thrust out of the foster care system but lack family support or strong adult mentors to help guide their way in the world.

The \$715,000 includes:

-- \$200,000 to be awarded as a competitive grant for a mentoring program for youth coming out of foster care

-- \$175,000 for job training, tuition waivers and recruiting more foster parents, especially in rural Alaska communities

-- \$160,500 to pay for two new social workers who help teach independent living skills to foster youth through the Office of Children's Services. They join four existing staff who are now responsible for a total of 350 youth.

-- \$100,000 to help with housing costs the first few months young adults live on their own.

-- \$80,000 to pay transportation costs for foster children to stay at the same

"My hope is that everything passes through the Senate," Metivier said. "I know we have support there, from Sen. Davis and Sen. Ellis -- they've both been really supportive. If it does (pass), it will be huge for our youth."

school, even if they are shuffled from foster home to foster home

Metivier was one of the fortunate foster kids who was placed with a single family, which provided a layer of support and stability many other children never enjoy. The state granted her a tuition waiver, which helped her pursue a social work degree.

About 2,030 Alaska youth are in foster care. Last year, 111 of those young people reached age 18, a milestone that spells the end of most state assistance. Youth who age out of the system leave foster care walking a fine line, often without adult backup, as they try to find their feet in the world.

"For them to just have one supportive adult in their life will make a world of difference," Metivier said.

The money approved Thursday will help cover college tuition and job training for some, assist others with rent the first few months out of the system, and add two independent living specialists to the Office of Children's Services. The four specialists in place now have a total caseload of about 350 young people, Metivier said.

Gara said the money is "a really good step forward."

"Maybe there's something to the conservative ethic that sometimes government can't get involved if the family's not going to help," he acknowledged. "With foster care, we're the guardian. We can't blame it on a parent, because legally, that's us."

Rep. John Coghill, R-North Pole, agreed that the state should step up to its responsibility for children who are wards of the state.

"That becomes part of the problem -- how do we handle them like we'd expect a parent to handle them?" he said. "We should do it, and do it well."

Gara has taken the lead on foster care issues, but credits colleagues for contributions that may have led to bipartisan support. Asked how long he's been working on the issue, he replied, "Not as long as Sen. Davis."

Raised in foster care in New York after his father was murdered, Gara said this isn't a personal victory. He was one of the lucky ones, nurtured by adults who stressed education and hard work. But he did agree that advocates with personal experience in a range of issues seem better able to explain the imperative in a more meaningful way.

Lawmakers on both sides of the political aisle unanimously supported the funding, a feat Gara termed "a wonderful convergence of liberal, middle-of-the-road and conservative thought." More foster care funding has been a priority of his for years. What was different this time around? Gara chalked that up to a shift in the way lawmakers do business.

"There are two ways to legislate," he said. "One is to reflexively stand in the way of everything the guy on the other side of the aisle wants to do. That's the Ben Stevens way of legislating. And (the other) is to say politics isn't about taking as many prisoners as you can. There are a lot of disagreements in this building on things, but I think you've reached a level of political maturity when you're able to say we're

going to disagree on the things we disagree with, but we're going to find common ground where we can."

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