

Foster kids' future tough

Adult life hard when they 'age out' of care

By AMY BENNETT WILLIAMS • awilliams@news-press.com • April 7, 2010

1:10 A.M. — If the American Medical Association were to trumpet new research concluding viruses cause disease, the reaction would likely be the same: So? Tell us something we don't know.

That's how children's advocates greeted a national study's findings that life can be hard for former foster children when they grow up.

Unemployment, homelessness and poor educations plague them at higher rates than they do other young adults, according to research by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and Partners for Our Children at the University of Washington.

The national study, released today, found that of the 30,000 young people who age out of foster care annually, only 6 percent had finished college by age 24, fewer than half had jobs and almost 40 percent had been homeless or "couch-surfed" since leaving foster care.

In Florida, children leave the system at 18, said Nadereh Salim, chief executive officer of the Children's Network of Southwest Florida, which serves children in state care, but they can get up to \$1,200 a month and educational and social help until they're 23.

That 23rd birthday looms large in Jason York's mind as he thinks about his future. Now 21, York spent his childhood in foster care, never logging more than a year in a single school.

"It can be kind of heartbreaking growing up among strangers," he says.

Living alone in an apartment with no airconditioning, York takes computer and graphics classes at High Tech Central in Fort Myers, but worries about what will happen when his stipend dries up.

"I still don't have any real job skills," he says. "I know it's not going to be easy."

Although the Children's Network has three independent living specialists who help former foster children with everything from finding an apartment to balancing checkbooks to planning meals, it doesn't have somewhere for them to live while they're finding their feet as adults.

That's a gap Jane Bell and Jam Sommer want to help fill. The two women, a former probation officer and attorney, respectively, want to create a nonprofit residential stepping stone — a place these young adults can live independently with on-site guidance and support.

"My dream is that we'd be able to purchase an efficiency hotel," says Bell. "That way, we could still provide them with privacy they need — give them a key and place to call their own — while teaching them about life."

Bell says she's seen too many "dual kids" — those both in the dependency and the juvenile justice systems who wind up at the Salvation Army, a rescue mission or in jail once they leave foster care.

"If you want someone to end up in corrections as an adult, lock them up as a juvenile," says Sommer. "All the studies show that's the surest way to make that

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happen.”

How, when to help

The idea, says Bell, is to catch them at front end rather than at the back — before they get in trouble with the law, she says. “Plus, it’s much cheaper to do it this way.”

Salim wants to see these young adults housed somewhere affordable, near jobs, shopping, schools and public transportation. She’d also like to see the front end extended even further.

“This study reinforces what we already know: We need to prevent the removal of children and serve them in their own homes. No matter how many mentors you throw at them, the ultimate solution does lie somewhere else.”

Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform puts it this way: “The way you solve the problem of kids aging out is preventing so many of them from aging in,” he says. “No matter how hard you try — and it’s important to try hard — you can only undo so much damage after the fact.”

The key, Wexler says, is not taking children from troubled families, but helping them heal so they can stay together.

“Everybody sympathizes with the 16-year-old who has no future and no skills,” Wexler says, “but, ultimately, the best way to help that child is to help that child’s mother.”

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