



SPECIAL - Aged out and alone: Foster kids thrown into independence

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By NINA CRISCUOLO

An 18th birthday is usually viewed as the transition from childhood to adulthood even though many teens continue to see support from their parents well into their twenties.

Unless they are in the foster care system. For them an 18th birthday catapults them into an unfamiliar world of independence.

Kasie Olds entered the foster care system when she was eight years old.

"We're not bad kids, we just come from bad situations," says Olds.

Like one out of ten foster children Olds aged out of the system.

Independent living coordinators like Casey Spencer help teens prepare for that transition.

"We see a range of youth from not wanting any services - we see the youth that want to take advantage of everything but they are really really scared," says Spencer.

"The hardest part is 'where am I going to be on breaks when I can't stay in my dorm' and 'how am I going to get the money to do it if I have to?'" says Matt Hudson, a former foster child.

"I was scared out of my pants when I was going," Olds says. "What am I going to do? How am I going to raise myself after being on my own, you know? How would I raise myself? What life skills would I bring?"

Very few studies have been completed tracking foster youth after they leave the system.

But one of those studies says three out of four kids say that independent living skills were presented to them before their exit date, and only a few receive hands on preparation.

Only 11% felt ready to apply for jobs, obtain health insurance and public assistance, and less than half knew how to get a driver's license.

"I've applied for many jobs and got calls back - 'well, we don't think you're qualified enough for the job' - which puts a downer on me because I'm respectable and doing everything I need to do," says Olds.

Olds completes her freshman year at Pittsburg State University this month, an accomplishment many foster kids never reach. But she knows she deserves this after overcoming so much.

"The state of Kansas pays for it once you age out," Olds says. "You have to do certain requirements - you have to meet with your independent worker once a month, you have to get a work study job, you have to keep your grades up and then you get your college paid for free. So foster kids think they don't get to go to college, but take what the state gives you."

Kansas foster children are entitled to four years at any state university or college. It is one benefit to surviving the system.

"That's a pretty big chunk of college expenses right there and then there are more additional funds available," Spencer says.

Matt Hudson's funds ran out after completing his undergraduate degree. Now he is a law student at Washburn University.

Hudson is from Humboldt, Kansas and entered foster care after being abused by his father.

"It wasn't easy, but eventually probably about the time I was graduating from high school, as I was starting to get involved in advocacy side of it and things like it, aging out maybe even as well, that overall time period, that's when the perspective changed to 'I wouldn't have what I have - I probably wouldn't have any of it if that wouldn't have happened,'" Hudson says.

A regional advocate for foster care Hudson believes while financial support is now in place for teens aging out there is still a huge gap in care and it can not be filled with dollar bills or independent living preparation.

"It's not a solution that comes from funding," Hudson says. "It's not a solution that comes from some act of Congress unless they force people against their will to start caring about other people which I'm pretty sure they can't do. The biggest thing I can look back at is what people did for me and honestly if you look at the success of people in foster care it's probably going to come from those same places."

An element that Matt Hudson, Kasie Olds, and foster care experts say is missing for kids already left without a family.



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