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## FOSTER CARE

**Foster kids at 18 aren't ready to go it alone in the world**By *Kathy Markeland*

Posted: July 24, 2010 | (5) COMMENTS

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Each year, more than 7,000 Wisconsin children are removed from their parents' homes and placed in foster care. Most of these children will live with relatives or foster parents for a short time and then be reunited with their families. Sometimes families can't be reunited and children are connected to new families through adoption.

But for up to 600 young people in Wisconsin each year, their stay in foster care ends when they turn 18 and "age out" of their foster home. They "age out" of the system that promised to protect them.

The national data on the experiences of youths that age out of the foster care system are grim. Compared to their peers in the general population, these young people have a higher incidence of physical and mental health needs, yet are less likely to have health care coverage.

They are more likely than their peers to experience homelessness and less likely to have completed high school or to enroll in higher education.

They are more likely to experience incarceration and homelessness and less likely to be employed. Those who do have a job are working fewer hours and earn significantly less than peers their age (Midwest Study on the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, 2010).

Many of the deficits that former foster youths face may be attributed to their difficult and chaotic childhoods. Foster children often experience disruptions in their education, inconsistent relationships with caring adults and insufficient opportunities to "practice" independence, such as learning to drive.

As one veteran of the foster care system observed, the system is designed to protect children, not to "launch" them. But perhaps an even greater deficit that these young people face is that they are "launched" into adult life too soon.

Ask any parent of an 18-year-old today whether the child is ready to make it on his or her own. In fact, research shows that young people today are moving into adult roles later in their lives and relying more heavily upon their parents for financial and social support into their mid-20s and beyond.

Since the 1970s, there has been a 50% increase in the number of young adults living at home. The majority of young people in college rely upon their parents' health insurance plan to provide them health security - a trend recognized in the recent federal health care reform act, which extends health care coverage to dependents up to the age of 26 regardless of their student status.

In recent years, in response to the national trends showing a significant increase in the number of youths "aging out," and involving the commitment of community members, foster parents, social service providers and policy-makers, Wisconsin has taken some steps in the right direction. Since 1999, all Wisconsin counties have received modest federal resources to support individualized planning for foster youths as they prepare for their transition to adulthood.

In 2008, Wisconsin began extending publicly funded health coverage for youths exiting foster care up to the age of 21.

In addition, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families sponsors a scholarship program for higher education, which first awarded 30 scholarships to former foster youths in 2001 and last year provided seven times that number. The department recently announced a new federally funded initiative that will enable more foster youths to qualify for transitional jobs.

All of these efforts are laudable, yet the current government support provided to former foster youths is a far cry from the kind of financial, emotional and social support that parents provide.

While the number of higher education scholarships has increased significantly, Wisconsin foster youths often aren't completing their degrees. Even if they are in college, they still have to find a place to stay when the dorms are closed. And the reality is that the majority of former foster youths are not pursuing higher education. They are doing what they can to get by and make it on their own.

While the state can't presume to completely fill a parental role, there are many examples across the country of communities that have done more to care for these at-risk youths.

The Midwest Study reveals that investing more in young adults as they transition can result in better outcomes. Illinois is one of a handful of states that has allowed foster youths to stay in care until the age of

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21.

While some might assume that foster youths are eager to leave "the system" as soon as they can, the experience in Illinois shows that the majority of foster youths will stay in their foster home, when given the option to do so.

A new federal law now allows states to tap into additional funding when states permit young people to stay in foster care during their early adult years.

While the system may at times fail these young people, the former foster youths I have had the privilege to meet are far from failing. These young people are amazingly resilient and resourceful, and they are fiercely committed to seeing the system improve for future generations of foster care kids.

The state sponsors a Foster Youth Advisory Council that has been very active in recent years, advocating with state officials and legislators for better training for foster parents, more resources to support higher education attainment and extension of foster care to age 21. We owe it to them to honor their voices and their experience by responding to their priorities for the system and for foster youths.

The research tells us that there is more Wisconsin can and should do for former foster youths. And our own Wisconsin youths are raising their voices as well. They are telling us that, just like all young people, they need a support system that gives them space to make mistakes and a place to come back to when they are ready to try again.

They are telling us that they need permanent connections in their lives: someone to call when they are lonely, someone to help them move, someone to go home to on the holidays.

They are telling us they need what every young adult needs.

*Kathy Markeland is associate director for the Wisconsin Association of Family & Children's Agencies in Madison, which represents agencies across Wisconsin providing mental health, child welfare and social services. Since 2007, she has coordinated WAFCA's Youth Transitioning to Adulthood Initiative.*

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**JaneDoeSpeaks** - Jul 24, 2010 11:54 PM

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This is progress. We must not step back from the progress to keep a firm understanding of why these programs are important to work for a better tomorrow for foster care kids. Kids that age out are often alone in the world facing hurdles of homelessness and managing in a crazy world all the pressures of being an adult without support. If one really thinks about it at 18 how many of us could of managed alone without help - housing, transportation, medical, paying bills, etc. These kids enter a scary, unsecure world where they are different without family trying to look the part to attend college. When you see things like adoption fairs of older kids trying to connect to have a family its heartbreaking.

Plight of kids that fall through the cracks of foster care to age out at 18 before these programs to address their needs existed fill our prisons all over this country today. Their stories are heartbreaking. Especially for the kids that went from foster care to gangs where gangs are their sense of family. Rise of gangs followed the lack of funding of social programs as kids sought out some sense of what they saw as the roots of security in family. Others fell to drugs, drinking and the pit of jobs that can never provide more than hand to mouth existence. Gaming the system is a way of life that was learned. We the adults taught these kids to game the system with loopholes where nothing is taken seriously because of assumption a backdoor exists.

Issues are bipartisan where as a society we have to stop looking at as a contest for someone elected official or another to have all the answers. Its going to take all of us working very hard to push young adults on the right path of life, leading by example. Find this quote so inspiring ....

"It's about the journey--mine and yours--and the lives we can touch, the legacy we can leave, and the world we can change for the better."  
— Tony Dungy

**fury2g** - Jul 25, 2010 11:39 AM

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Foster kid or not, what child is ready to leave the nest at 18? Very, very few of us I'm sure. I know I wasn't. Its important to remember, that these kids did ask to be in the position that they are in and will need our support not the jsonline blog bickering that I'm sure is yet to come.

Simply moving the age a child can remain in care to 21 will do little if more support isn't given to foster parents, skills of living independently aren't required of every child and family, and if resources to meet the needs of this vulnerable population are constantly being stripped from the budget (state and federal). Wisconsin and all states can do better. We just have to want to.

**CASAGAL** - Jul 25, 2010 11:45 AM

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This is a topic that is near and dear to my heart. We are treatment foster parents and adoptive parents of two teenage girls. Treatment foster care provides a stable and healthy home to children who have come from a dysfunctional family, have histories of sexual, mental and physical abuse, neglect, have mental health issues and much more. We specialize in helping teenage girls who have been victims of abuse: physical, mental and sexual abuse. Many of our teens have mental health issues. We have experience in helping girls with PTSD, bipolar, Axis II personality, ADHD, Reactive Attachment Disorder and more. Whether you agree with psychotropic meds for children or not, they

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have their place. When you see a child suffer because they cannot rid themselves of the terrible things that have hurt them in the past, then you know that there has to be more help for them. These girls fight hard to get over the past and get on with the future. Many of them do not get to until they are 15 or 16, which gives us a precious few years to help undo a lifetime of pain and suffering. Counseling, therapy, medication and even some in-hospital stays are needed to get through the pain and suffering. All of these things cost money and without insurance it is not possible to participate in any of this. The issue at hand is that miraculously at 18 these problems do not just go away. At nineteen they lose their insurance and then they lose their ability to attend counseling and more importantly the meds they have taken are now unobtainable. While on the phone with health and human services trying to secure health insurance for our 19 year old she was told that if she became pregnant and had a baby she could continue to receive her health insurance! She is in college and trying to better herself and the answer that county gave her was to get pregnant! This is ridiculous. Without health care it is really hard to do well & stay well. We are on the right path but we need to act now to help now!

fury2g - Jul 25, 2010 10:05 PM

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oops... meant to say, DIDN'T ask

J Smith - Jul 26, 2010 9:23 AM

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"Since 1999, all Wisconsin counties have received modest federal resources to support individualized planning for foster youths as they prepare for their transition to adulthood."

Ummm, no, As ~65% of WI foster children are created in Milwaukee, they received ~65 of the ~100 million dollar foster care program. Milwaukee has again sucked the lions share of the foster welfare for themselves.

It is really not a chronic state wide problem, if the people of Milwaukee would shape up and only contribute ~25% of the foster children, much more could be done for the children state-wide. The children did not magically appear to disparingly uncaring parents in Milwaukee.

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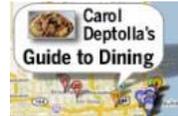
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