



On Their Own at 18

Transitional Housing for Foster Youth on Chopping Block

Sunday, March 7, 2010

In the wake a 2008 Grand Jury report characterizing Santa Barbara County's Child Welfare Service Department as "highly inefficient" and plagued with "discontinuity of oversight and care," a state program was implemented in the county to help emancipated foster youth transition to independent living. The program — [Transitional Housing Placement Plus Program \(THP-Plus\)](#) — costs the state \$25 million annually. Santa Barbara County's allotment is reportedly \$300,000.

Now THP-Plus — created in 2001 to address the growing number of young people who become homeless after they "age out" of foster care at the age of 18, and which helps 2,000 youths annually — is in danger of being cut, along with a number of other human and health service programs, if Governor Schwarzenegger does not receive the \$6.9 billion in extra federal funding he is asking for as part of his 2010-2011 budget.

Locally, the program's elimination could mean the closure of La Morada, a county-owned and grant-funded facility located near San Marcos High School that currently houses eight emancipated S.B. foster youth. It could also lead to the removal of 50 to 60 young people from THP-Plus in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties. Jim Roberts, CEO and founder of [Family Care Network](#) — one of many THP-Plus providers throughout the state but the only such provider here in Santa Barbara — explained that the area would no longer receive funding from the California Department of Social Services, which distributes THP-Plus funds to individual counties. Giving a bit of background, Roberts explained the statewide implementation of the program was a collaboration between the [John Burton Foundation](#), the California Department of Social Services, and the Corporation for Supportive Housing, and that kids are referred to THP-Plus by the federal Independent Living Program (ILP)

Roberts described the relatively small financial investment of the program compared to other state expenses. "It's fairly inexpensive program," he said. "[It costs less] than what they spent on furniture. They're willing to spend \$30 million on furniture and \$45 million on automobiles that they didn't really need, but they won't take care of these kids. There are some weird priorities there."

Nonprofit organizations like Family Care Network have helped emancipated foster kids — who may not have acquired necessary life skills and knowledge — to successfully live on their own by offering intensive counseling and classes as well as providing safe and supportive environments in which to live. Programs teach recently-emancipated youth how to manage finances, look for housing, secure a job, etc. "We really want to see the community become aware of this. We've dumped these kids for too long — let's not go backward. It would be like taking like taking a step back 15 years," said Roberts.

The unfortunate reality, it has been reported, is that foster kids commonly fall off the radar screen when they turn 18 or graduate from high school, and the families they have been living with no longer receive

state-administered finances. “How many kids who are 18- and 19-years-old, even coming from a lot of family support, are ready to just go out on their own with no support, to take care of themselves, and to live independently and be successful?” asked Roberts.

High rates of unemployment and incarceration as well as low rates of education characterize the lives of many “aged-out” foster youth. According to a study conducted by the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#) (a private charity that works with disadvantaged children), only 46 percent of former foster youth complete high school, which is half the rate of their peers. They are also 2.8 times more likely to be arrested and 70 percent more likely to be incarcerated. “We’d like the governor to back off on this because it costs a whole lot more to service these kids in the system in other ways — via criminal justice, or mental health, or if they’re homeless — than it does just to help them get on their feet,” said Roberts, who’s planning a trip to Sacramento this week for legislative advocacy work.

Pointing to a number of hard facts, Family Care Network is fighting hard to prevent the elimination of THP-Plus by generating awareness around the issue. “The program has been very successful statewide,” said Roberts, “It’s accomplishing what it was designed to do.”

To illustrate the program’s recent successes, the nonprofit cited a study conducted by the John Burton Foundation, a community-based initiative out of San Francisco: A 2008 survey of 458 youth in THP-Plus found a 19 percent gain in employment, a 13 percent increase in hourly wage, and similar advances in education, health, and housing stability. The survey also indicated a 39 percent decrease in rates of “disconnectedness,” defined as an individual who is neither employed nor attending school.

Case in Point



Tamera Richardson, although all smiles here, is nevertheless concerned what her future will hold if La Morada is closed.

Twenty-two-year-old Santa Maria native Tamera Richardson — currently enrolled in THP-Plus and living at La Morada — took on the role of mother at age seven. While her single mom worked full-time, Tamera babysat her younger brother and sister, sometimes taking days off of school if her mom was unable to find someone to watch them. When trouble arose, which it commonly did since her siblings were known hell-raisers, it was Tamera who had to deal with it. “When my brother got suspended, it was like I got suspended too because I had to stay home and watch him,” she remembered.

Because of days and weeks of missed school, Tamera constantly fell behind in her studies and was told over and over that she would not be able to move up grade levels with the rest of her class. “But because of the good relationship I had with my teachers,” Tamera said, “I was always allowed to [move up.]” Beyond her academic troubles, Tamera was forced to cope with regular physical and verbal abuse inflicted on her by her mother.

“She had a lot of anger, so she would hit me and I’d just hold it in. She’d try to beat my brother and sister, but they’d fight back and spit on her, so she put all her anger on me.” Tamera would show up to school with bruises, a busted lip, or a black eye. She also began self-harming. Beyond taking care of her younger siblings, Tamera had to mother her own parent. “She’d drop pills and I’d have to chase her around the [apartment] complex,” said Tamera.

They were constantly visited by Child Protective Services because, as Tamera put it, her mother “was known around town...people knew we were having problems.” Although she was able to retain custody for years, Tamera’s mother had a breakdown when Tamera was 16 and was admitted to the Ventura Hospital for severe depression. Tamera and her brother and sister, because they were all minors, were placed in the care of foster parents after her siblings proved impossible for their grandmother to deal with.

Tamera bounced from foster family to foster family for two years, with her siblings, until she had to separate from them when she turned 18 and “aged out” of the system.

Out on her own, she had to cope with the gut-wrenching fact that her brother and sister were being placed in group homes throughout the state — as well as transitioning in and out of juvenile hall. “What really ripped me apart was when my brother and sister had to leave me,” she said, as she considered them her own children. “That’s where it gets emotional because it was like a mother losing her kids.” After sleeping in parks and on various friends’ couches, Tamera was eventually able to buy a car — which she lived out of — while she worked three jobs. She survived that way for awhile, but was ultimately referred to THP-Plus by the federal Independent Living Program (ILP).

Since moving to Santa Barbara six months ago and taking advantage of all of THP-Plus’s offerings, Tamera has finally been able to concentrate on her own well-being in a safe and supportive environment. She likens the workers at La Morada to family members, there to offer advice and care when she needs it. “It’s given me hope,” she said. “It’s helped me achieve my goals and allowed me to be a college kid. I can now focus on my future and what I need to get done.” Tamera said that, most simply, La Morada has allowed her to worry less about day-to-day survival and concentrate on her long-term academic and career goals. “I finally feel safe,” she said, referencing the stable, secure setting of her group home and its five full-time staff members.

But the thought of having the program suddenly taken away weighs heavily on Tamera’s mind. “It would be depressing. I’d have to drop out of college, get a full time job, and try and support self. I’d live back in my car, most likely.” As part of the requirements of living at La Morada, Tamera — along with the other residents — is required to attend school (she’s currently attending SBCC as a transfer student) and have at least a part-time job. Residents can live in the facility for as long as two years — though they can leave whenever they want — and are required to pay rent, submit a deposit, and pay for utilities. Each resident is assigned daily chores, such as cleaning and maintaining the common kitchen and living room areas, but are free to come and go throughout the day and night as they please.

The idea, said Transitional Living Center Supervisor Shannon Bell, is to let them live as close to independently as possible, but with the structure and support of a devoted group of social workers.

“Taking away the program would make me feel like I was losing a family; it’d make me feel handicapped,” Tamera said. “They’re always there for you. If you want to go for a walk or head to the gym — but you don’t want to go by yourself — there’s always someone who will go with you.” Tamera remembered an incident when a local bank employee refused to help her, but changed his mind when a La Morada worker accompanied Tamera back to the bank for a few words.

At the moment, Tamera is working hard at school and is about to start a job with the county working with troubled youth. She also hopes to one day become a social worker, working with mental health patients. She’s made progress, through counseling, in establishing a healthier relationship with her mother, forgiving her for the troubled environment she grew up in.

“I want to be an example for my brother and sister, to show them what they can accomplish. It’s all about them,” she said. “I also want to be an example for all the troubled kids out there who are at risk, as I was, of just becoming another statistic.”

To read more about Family Care Network and to make a donation to the nonprofit, visit their Web site [here](#).