



Editorial: Extend foster care to age 21

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As foster children go, Fairfield's Gabriela Marin is one of the luckier ones. At 18, she has been turned out of the foster care system, but not before she earned a high school diploma, a college scholarship and secured a student loan to pay for dorm expenses.

Recently, more than two dozen caring women from throughout northern Solano County came together to throw her a "dorm shower," providing the things that most parents would send off to college with their children.

That sort of community support is certainly laudable, but it isn't enough.

Some 5,000 foster children age out of the California's system each year. While transitional housing programs are available for some, the vast majority are abruptly thrown into adulthood with few skills and little guidance.

A proposal to change that situation has been making its way through the Legislature for months now and is on the verge of being approved. Assembly Bill 12 by San Jose Democrat Jim Beall would extend financial support to foster children -- under certain conditions -- until they are 21. Better

yet, the bill would get the federal government to pick up the tab, by aligning California's program with one adopted by Congress a few years ago.

Under AB 12, foster youth who continue their education or job training and who work at least part-time would be eligible for extended benefits.

Currently, California spends about \$740 a month, or \$9,000 a year, per foster child. Penny-pinchers who believe

that's too much should consider that it just about matches what the state spends on a welfare parent with two children and is one-fifth what it costs to incarcerate a prison inmate. And the jails and welfare rolls are full for former foster children.

AB 12 supporters predict that every dollar spent on helping foster children until they are 21 will yield a \$2.49 return in productivity.

It has been shown that children in stable homes rely on their parents for support until age 26. Foster kids will never have that kind of backing. But California can do a better job of assisting them in the transition to adulthood.

AB 12 is now ready to go to the floor of the state Senate, which should do as the Assembly did and adopt it unanimously. Promising students like Gabriela Marin need the help now.

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