

VOICES FOR VIRGINIA'S CHILDREN

Issue brief in Foster Care

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How Prepared are Virginia's Young Adults for Life after Foster Care?

Foster care youth are some of the most vulnerable youth in Virginia, yet they lack supports and resources as they come of age. Current research shows that despite their survival skills, the typical youth who ages out of the foster care system is without social and family support and is not successful at employment and work pursuits. This issue brief will summarize results of national studies of social support, family, health, education and employment outcomes of foster youth and foster youth alumni in the U.S. The brief looks at the youth aging out in Virginia and some resources available for them. And finally, recommendations are made for improving outcomes for foster youth after they age out of the system.

Aging Out of the System

When foster youth turn 18, the legal age of adulthood, they age out of the foster care system. States have the flexibility to determine how youth who age out qualify to continue to receive services as a former foster youth or foster care alumnus. The majority of these youth do not continue to receive services after age 18; although their risk factors indicate that they need them. Research shows that the 20,000 youth leaving foster care each year in the U.S. are more likely to: have been involved with the criminal justice system; have been pregnant or to be a parent; have lower reading and math skills; have experienced homelessness¹; have suffered health or mental health issues; and have abused alcohol and drugs.² A 2002 National Opinion Research Center survey indicated that the American public does not expect young adults to be financially independent until age 21.³ However, young adults leaving foster care are expected to be able to make their own way at age 18. Given that youth leaving foster care are highly likely to have emotional, behavioral, developmental, and health problems⁴, expecting these more vulnerable youth to be financially stable at a younger age than youth from the general population is unrealistic.

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Federal Law and Flexibility

Out of concern for older youth who age out of foster care, Congress passed the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-169). This act:

- Appropriates "Chafee funds" for youth ages 14 to 21 in the foster care system, or who have aged out of the foster care system;
- Allows states to use up to one-third of their Chafee funds for room and board for foster youth ages 18-21 transitioning from care;
- Allows Chafee funds to be used for education assistance, training, counseling or limited financial assistance for youth up to age 21;
- Mandates states to provide the same services to their Native American children;
- Requires states to provide job placement and job retention services for foster care youth aging out; and
- Allows states to provide Medicaid coverage for youth age 18-21 after leaving foster care.

One hallmark of this act is the flexibility it allows states to custom fit their services to their aging out population. However, the amount of Chafee funds appropriated to each state represents only a small portion of total foster care funds and is not adequate to provide all of the services allowed under the Chafee Act.

Aging Out in Virginia

Youth transitioning out of foster care may continue to receive services through the Virginia Department of Social Services Independent Living Program. This program gives federal funds to the local social service agencies to assist them in providing the basic life skills training, education, and employment preparation the youth need to become self-supporting adults. In addition, there are resources to assist youth who age out of foster care and pursue educational programs. The federal Education and Training Vouchers Program financially assists youth adopted at age 16 or older and former foster youth to attend post-secondary education and vocational training programs. The program pays for tuition, fees, room and board, and other college-related expenses up to age 21, and possibly age 23. Former foster youth, age 21 and over, who pursue education or training may apply to the Independent Living Educational/Vocational Trust Fund for assistance with costs associated with education. Also, the Virginia Community College System tuition grants are available to former foster youth and adopted youth determined to have special needs. Virginia provides Medicaid to former foster youth age 18 to 21 that continue to receive independent living services and are enrolled in educational programs.

Is aging out of the system an issue for Virginia's foster care youth? Is there a sizable population which ages out of the system? Here is a snapshot of the foster care population in Virginia in October 2004⁵:

- 211 infants less than 1 year (2.6%)
- 1,385 children ages 1-5 (17.3%)
- 945 children ages 6 to 9 (11.8%)
- 948 children ages 10 to 12 (11.9%)
- 1,928 adolescents ages 13 to 15 (24.1%)
- 2,182 youth ages 16 to 18 (27.3%)
- 388 youth age 19 and older (4.9%)

A significant number of Virginia's foster youth are in the system near or at the time of aging out. In fact, the 16 to 18 year old group is the largest group represented in foster care in Virginia. However, when these youth turn 19

or older, only one in five of them qualifies and/or chooses to participate in education programs and/or Independent Living Program services available to foster care alumni.

Why do few Virginian foster care alumni take advantage of available services and programs after age 18? As explained, to do this, they must be enrolled in an education or training program. If national data reflect post-secondary pursuits of foster care youth in Virginia, they have a low post-secondary success rate, leading their numbers to drop off after some time in vocational training or college. Many youth who age out are not able to meet educational requirements to continue to receive services. Discussion groups held across Virginia by Voices for Virginia's Children in 2005 also indicated that youth tire of being part of "the system" and eagerly embrace freedom from social services.

Family Relationships

Virginia's foster care system is designed to prevent removal of children from their families, to provide services to return children home to their parents if they have been removed, and to find a permanent placement if returning home is not possible in the end. A strong body of research shows that a sense of permanency is crucial for children.⁶

As children prepare to leave the foster care system and/or age out, they have unique needs related to family. They may not have relationships with their parents and may need a new legal bond with surrogate parents. They also may need assistance in negotiating relationships with their biological parents if they plan to maintain these relationships after foster care.⁷

Foster youth in care reported feeling closest to their siblings of all family members.⁸ One foster youth conveyed his deep feelings toward his siblings when he said, "...Being torn away from my brothers and sisters...they were my whole life...It was probably the most painful thing in the world. They told me I would be able to see them a lot, but I was lucky to see them at all."⁹ Maintaining relationships with siblings and other kin is needed but often not occurring for foster youth. Visits with siblings

and kin should be prioritized and resources need to be allocated for these visitations.

In Illinois, a Senate Joint Resolution was adopted 2004 that appointed a Post-Adoption Continuing Contact Governor's Joint Task Force to study and make recommendations regarding post-termination of parental rights sibling contact. Already, policy of the State of Illinois mandated that contact be maintained between siblings pre-termination while they are in foster care or youth in care. The same type of prioritization of sibling rights needs to be made in Virginia to assist youth in care in maintaining their sibling relationships.

Social Supports

The significance of one person in a child's life may be underestimated. In fact, "connection to a knowledgeable and caring adult is the single most important contributor to resiliency in youth."¹⁰ Youth who found natural mentors in their environment reported lower levels of depression.¹¹ Several foster care youth attributed their survival and success to one person or one asset that assisted them in independent living.

Mentoring of foster care youth can help take the place of a parent as they take steps to live on their own and learn to take care of themselves. Mentor programs may play an important role in buffering the lack of support that aging out youth experience. It is unfortunate that too often mentors are not available.

Anecdotal stories and research both suggest the old adage to be true: "To the world, you may be just one person; but to one person, you may be the world." Increasing public awareness, mentor recruitment (especially adults formerly in foster care), and funding to support mentor programs may help connect more at-risk youth with a mentor.

Health Issues

In one study, a greater number of foster youth reported experiencing serious injuries than their peers.¹² Apparently, their lifestyle puts them more at risk for serious injury. This may be related to foster care youth's higher rate of experiencing violence and of perpetrating

violence. Also possibly related, a recent study of former foster children found they suffered post-traumatic stress disorder at twice the rate of U.S. war veterans¹³.

A study in the Midwest of 17 year-old foster youth still in care found that one-third of female foster care youth reported a history of having been pregnant.¹⁴ Two-thirds of the girls who reported pregnancy also reported that they did not want to get pregnant. The study also found that the pregnant girls in foster care were less likely to seek an abortion than their peers.¹⁵ In the same study, one-quarter of foster care youth had been tested and/or treated for a sexually transmitted disease, four times the national average¹⁶.

Young adults who age out of the system are also at risk for not being treated for asthma, depression, or other chronic conditions.¹⁷ They too often abuse alcohol or drugs.¹⁸

On a positive note, foster care youth are more likely to have participated in counseling than their peers.¹⁹ They are also more likely to have been educated about family planning and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.²⁰

It is important to provide health coverage to the youth who age out of the system, given their high likelihood of health issues. While the Chafee Act allows Virginia to use its Chafee funds to provide Medicaid to youth ages 18-21 who age out of foster care, because only one in five of Virginia's foster care youth remain in care after age 18, the majority of the Commonwealth's youth leaving the foster care system are without Medicaid services.

In Virginia, youth are not eligible to remain in foster care after turning 18 years old because they are considered adults and are no longer in the custody of the local department of social services. These young people may continue to receive independent living services provided they are enrolled in an educational or vocational program. Some foster care youth may be employed or have another reason for not being in school, but still need to have Medicaid coverage. Medicaid coverage is especially important for former foster youth,

who have more health issues and greater need for health prevention services than their peers.

Education

Educational success in high school is key to an adult's success in the labor market. In a recent study more than 700 17 year old youth still in foster care were interviewed about their educational experiences. This group revealed that they were more likely to repeat a grade, more than twice as likely to be suspended, and four times as likely to be expelled as their peers.²¹ Over one-third of foster care youth reported experiencing five or more school changes.²² School mobility has been a significant predictor of school failure.²³

While 85 percent of youth from the general population graduate from high school, only about half of youth who age out of the system graduate from high school.²⁴ Despite these odds, 17-year old youth in foster care reported having high educational aspirations.²⁵ This is a strength to be built upon; however, the key is finding how to engage foster kids in school and help them navigate the system even when they do attend multiple schools. Schools with high success rates for educating at-risk youth are typically small, have high expectations for their students, and have the community involved as partners with the school.²⁶

In terms of post-secondary pursuits, a study published this year about foster care alumni found that 43 percent of foster care youth had participated in some type of postsecondary education²⁷. However, the rates for completing these degrees are low. Sixteen percent of the alumni completed a vocational degree. Only two percent of alumni completed a bachelor's degree, compared to the general population (27.5 percent). Results of a review of selected studies revealed that between seven and 48 percent of foster care alumni were enrolled in college at some time, but only between one and five percent graduated.²⁸ A study of post-secondary educational success for Virginia's former foster youth would be helpful in gaining a picture of their post-secondary education pursuits.

Educational Progress in Virginia

Virginia's newly passed Senate Bill 1006 will potentially have a positive impact on foster children's educational experiences by providing much needed school stability in their lives. The bill states that when a child's out-of-home placement changes, it is to be determined by the child, the parents and/or caretakers, social service representatives, school teacher, social workers and counselors, if it is in the child's best interest to remain in his or her former school system. If these parties determine not changing schools is in the child's best interest, the new law mandates that the child remain enrolled in the old school without tuition fees. If it is not in the best interest of the child to attend his or her former school, the new school must enroll the child within 72 hours even if necessary documents are not present at that time (but the documents need to be provided within 30 days).

The biggest barrier to implementing Senate Bill 1006 is anticipated to be the transportation of students from their new foster placement to their former school district. A memo to local departments of social services advised that the agency with legal custody should explore all options for providing for the child's transportation from the new foster care placement to the previous school.²⁹ Bus tokens, foster parents transporting the child, Comprehensive Services Act (CSA) and/or local school district funding for transportation were offered as examples of ways to provide transportation. Codification clarifying whose responsibility it is to pay for transportation costs related to the bill would make implementation of the bill more certain.

Employment

Former foster care youth have been slightly more likely than their peers to have work experience.³⁰ Despite this, their peers catch up and do much better in the labor market. Youth in the foster care system were underemployed, with no more than 45 percent of them working at any given point in time.³¹

Youth aging out of the system have slower salary increases than other youth, and their earnings were typically below poverty level.³²

A study on foster care and employment found that if foster care youth were working, it was more likely that they began working before age 18.³³ This indicates that part-time employment programs to engage foster youth in the labor market before they turn 18 may result in better employment experiences.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Roanoke: Tracking Those Who Leave Independent Living

In Roanoke, the Department of Social Services sends foster care alumni who leave Roanoke's Independent Living (IL) program a brief survey with a self-addressed envelope to track information about their lives after care. The survey asks about job and housing status. It also invites foster care alumni to share their opinions of the IL program. Upon return of a completed survey, DSS sends the youth a WalMart gift card as a reward for their participation. This process could be very helpful if it was to be expanded to all of Virginia, as the surveys could give some sense of how those who age out of the system in Virginia are faring. Unfortunately, the most unstable youth are hardest to track and survey, and these most vulnerable youth would not be a part of the picture of youth leaving foster care.

Youth Input for Independent Living Skills Training

Many youth aging out in the foster care system have independent living status. "A nationally focused study found that youth who had received skills training in five areas—money management, credit management, consumer skills, education, and employment had significantly improved outcomes" for independent living.³⁴ In Arizona, a strong coalition of youth organized by the Children's Action Alliance has advocated that the choice of independent living skills topics and the design of the teaching need to be chosen by foster care youth.³⁵ Youth involvement and input could be very beneficial to the effectiveness of these trainings. In Virginia,

the Youth Advisory Council, made up of current and former foster youth, ages 15 – 21, provides invaluable insight to the development of independent living skills and other services.

Chicago: A Successful Collaboration Model

In the early 1990's, a class action lawsuit in Illinois resulted in a streamlined service delivery program for youth aging out of the system in Chicago¹. At that time, community agencies joined with the state to plan a long-term model to meet the crisis needs of the aging out population.³⁶

A number of youth-serving agencies in Chicago now collaborate to provide services with a single point of entry and an in-house data base for each young person entering the system through aging out of care. Each young person is assessed and matched to one of six core service agencies. From there, each youth is assisted in finding housing and receives financial support for rent, startup supplies, utilities and other expenses. A development of this has been a supportive apartment program where youth from ages 18 to 21 are eventually able to keep their apartments. Youth work with a case manager in choosing a vocation and in entering and paying for an education or training program. The strengths of the program are the number of community partners collaborating in its design and service provision, the coordination of streamlined services, the availability of resources to provide youth leaving care, and the ability to respond to crisis while planning for long-term success strategies.

¹ The Illinois class action lawsuit claimed that the foster care system was failing its mandate to provide adequate transitional services to youth leaving care.

In Conclusion

The predicted future of foster care youth is not a bright one. The president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation went so far as to say that, “no group in the United States is more predictably headed for unhappy outcomes.”³⁷ These young adults leave the system with health and mental health problems, very low success rates in education systems, failure at employment and high rates of teen pregnancy and incarceration. These youth who have been put in the state’s custody and been impacted by foster care policy are drastically failing. Foster youth desperately need reform in the policies that impact them in order to become healthy contributing members of our communities.

Recommendations:

- Assure foster care youth maintain sibling relationships and are assisted in negotiating family relationships, possibly through adoption of a Sibling Bill of Rights in Virginia;
- Make available more mentor programs to match caring insightful mentors (especially former foster youth) with adolescents in foster care;
- Provide Medicaid coverage for youth ages 18-21 who age out of foster care, including those not enrolled in an education program;
- Resolve transportation issues resulting from Senate Bill 1006;
- Offer work study programs tailored for high school students in foster care or leaving foster care;
- Encourage Virginia’s former foster care youth and current foster care youth to advocate about their experiences and provide input to the foster care program.
- Track Virginia’s youth that leave foster care to gain information about their well-being and where the foster care system has served them or not served them well.

Endnotes

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