

Extending foster care: Teens should have a choice to stay in system

Posted by [jakrebs](#) May 27, 2009 05:01AM



At this time of year, when 18-year-olds are focused on their post-high school plans, most can count on families to help them make the transition to college, the military or a job.

For 1,100 teenagers in the foster care system, however, taking that first independent step can mean doing it all alone. No parents are around to count on, and there's no home to return to during the holidays or vacations.

Many teens in foster care -- 25,000 nationally -- "age out" of the system when they turn 18. In Dauphin County, the latest numbers available show that 19 youths aged out of foster care between Oct. 1, 2007, and Sept. 30, 2008. That number was nine in Cumberland County and five in Perry County.

Sadly, what this means for some of these young adults is homelessness, unemployment, dealing with mental health issues or getting in trouble with the law.

Pennsylvania needs a way to support teenagers who are leaving the foster care system. Not only is it the right thing to do because these 18-year-olds who have been taken away from their families need extra support, but financially there are costs associated with former foster kids ending up in prison or in institutions.

Some of the statistics backing up the need are depressing: Nearly half the teens who age out will not complete high school; half are still struggling to find a job four years after leaving foster care; and nearly one in four have been arrested since leaving the system.

A report released this month by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a statewide advocacy organization, recommends that all young adults be given the chance to stay in the foster care system until they turn 21. This way, they could complete their education, finish any treatment and receive more help as they get ready to enter the work force.

Recent passage of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act gives Pennsylvania access to federal funds to help support this idea. Currently, 36 states have varying programs that allow youth to stay in foster care until age 21. This means making sure they have the support they need for education, health insurance and housing.

Those who work with foster children say some teens in foster care have faced serious disruptions in their young lives, living with various families, which means changing schools and changing relationships. This puts

them at greater odds of not learning the skills to be self-sufficient and independent adults.

The ultimate goal in Pennsylvania, of course, should be to keep children in permanent homes. But when they are neglected and abused, they are sent to a foster care home with relatives or other families. And, sadly, nearly half of foster care children are living in an institutional setting in the state, which makes them less ready for the 'real world'.

Some teens still will decide to leave the foster care system when they turn 18, and they may be ready to face the world alone. For others, however, a few more years of assistance will go a long way.

In the end, those who have been abused or neglected by no fault of their own should not wind up with little or no support when they really need it as they become young adults.

Categories: [Editorials](#)

Comments

Footer