

Local

Ex-foster children struggle to survive; Housing, food, lifestyle choices prove to be huge hurdles for some

FRED KELLY

Staff Writer

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At 18, Tasha Johnston lives from place to place, calling anyone she knows for help or shelling out \$35 for a room at an extended-stay motel in north Charlotte.

Her goal to bankroll an apartment from her job as a restaurant cashier, which pays \$6.50 an hour, is a long shot.

"I'm scared," Johnston said.

Four months after "**aging out**" of North Carolina's **foster care** system, she knows she runs the risk of becoming another statistic.

Nearly 500 young people from ages 18 to 21 were released from the state's care in 2004. About one in eight is now homeless, a survey shows.

Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services administrators and state officials are examining reforms in **foster care**, including more benefits and opening a shelter for former foster children.

But critics say money alone won't fix the problem. They contend that social workers need to do a better job identifying adoptive homes for youths and preparing those left in the system for independent living.

The debate comes on the heels of national research showing that former foster children make up alarming percentages of the homeless and jail populations.

"It's not a pretty picture," said Cynthia Flynn, an associate with the Center for Child and Family Studies at the University of South Carolina. "They get victimized (by crime). They are homeless. They get pregnant. They get arrested."

North Carolina now provides an annual \$1,000 housing stipend and \$500 annually for living expenses for up to three years after foster youths leave the state's custody. Foster youths are also eligible for a \$5,000 annual voucher for college.

Even with that help, many young adults cannot survive in society because they lack education and mental and emotional stability, officials say.

A recent national study of 603 former **foster care** youths by the University of Chicago found that one-third of them had not graduated from high school and another one-third suffered from mental illness.

Foster youths in North Carolina receive independent living training on finance, healthy lifestyle and other areas.

But the emotional and psychological damage they endure before they enter the system makes it difficult to prepare them for adulthood, said Martha Are, a homeless policy specialist at the state Department of Health and Human Services.

"It slows their emotional development," Are said. "All of the states are grappling with this."

Johnston was put in state custody as a small child when it was determined that she had been abused and neglected. She exited the system just before her 18th birthday in February to go live with her mother and stepfather.

The living arrangement didn't work out and she has been homeless since late May.

She said she dreams about the day she'll have a stable home, but acknowledges it won't be easy.

Johnston has been diagnosed with multiple mental illnesses, including depression. And in February, she dropped out of high school.

Her situation is not unusual for young adults raised in **foster care** in North Carolina, a survey shows.

The N.C. Department of Health and Human Services surveyed former foster children. Federal rules require states to track the young adults' progress to determine how well the system prepares them to live independently.

Some 377 of the 471 young people who aged out of **foster care** last year responded. Some 13 percent of the youths reported that they are homeless, the state says.

Annually about 52 young adults age out of **foster care** in Mecklenburg County. Officials do not know how many are homeless.

South Carolina does not track how many foster youth end up homeless, but a 2003 survey conducted for the state indicates many are enduring hardships.

Researchers from the Center for Child and Family Studies at the University of South Carolina interviewed 191 former **foster care** clients.

They found that 14 percent of them said they needed help buying food or clothing.

It mirrors a national trend, experts say.

About 20,000 people age out of **foster care** annually in the United States.

Between 25 percent and 33 percent will experience homelessness within four years of leaving the system, said Philip Magano, director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness.

Some intentionally get arrested so they can go to jail, where they are guaranteed shelter and food, Magano said.

Others turn to prostitution to pay for housing, he added.

Sh-neila Lee, 18, aged out of the **foster care** system in November.

Lee said she was forced to stay at a friend's home until she found the \$300-a-month east Charlotte apartment she moved into recently. It is furnished with only an air mattress because Lee said she cannot afford furniture.

She is pregnant and wonders how she will pay the rent when the baby arrives.

"It's just enough (now) for my house and bills," said Lee, who makes \$7.50 an hour as a restaurant hostess. "Sometimes I eat macaroni two or three days in a row."

Congress did not fund programs for young people who age out of **foster care** until 1986. In 1999, federal lawmakers doubled funding to \$140 million a year.

But the spending has set off debate about how much aid to give foster youth when they reach adulthood.

Some argue that states should focus on helping foster youths learn about finances and healthy lifestyles before they are adults.

Benefits for foster youths once they leave the system are necessary, but they have a down side too, said Flynn, the researcher.

"If you give too much, it could be a disincentive for them to work," she said.

College students and other young people receive financial help and support from their families well into their 20s, homeless and child advocates counter.

Kaycee Odom, independent living coordinator for Youth Homes Inc., a nonprofit agency that contracts with the Mecklenburg Department of Social Services to provide **foster care** services.

Odom contends it is wrong to ask young people who are victims of abuse and neglect to survive on their own without more assistance.

"They are trying to make decisions on their own and have no idea how to do it," she said. "I've gotten calls at 8 at night from kids saying, 'I have nowhere to spend the night.' "

Exiting Foster Care A recent study by the University of Chicago on young adults in Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa who recently exited **foster care** found that they did not fare well. Here are some of the results:

13.8 percent had been homeless.

18.6 percent did not have enough money to pay rent.

7.4 percent had been evicted.

17.4 percent did not have enough money pay for utilities.

11.5 percent sometimes or often do not get enough to eat.

Source: Chapin Hall Center for Children at University of Chicago

Teresa Jackson, 20, has been evicted three times since she left **foster care** in 2003. Jackson said she frequently did not have enough money to pay rent. She is homeless, staying for now in a friend's home. Jackson said she sometimes visits a house where she once lived with other **foster care** youths to store her belongings and use the computer and the telephone.

Fred Kelly: (704) 358-5027; frkelly@charlotteobserver.com