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# Offering Help for Former Foster Care Youths

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DETROIT — When current and former foster children formed a group to help youths who had turned 18 and were "aging out" of the system, one of the first things they did was hold a luggage drive.

"We saw that a lot of the kids were taking their clothes out in garbage bags," said Chilton Brown, 23, a former foster child who spent ages 3 to 18 as a ward of the state, bouncing around 15 family homes or group residences.

A life contained in green plastic bags: it is the kind of humiliating detail that hits home hardest among foster youths themselves. It is also a telling sign of how unprepared many of these 18-year-olds are to live on their own, without families, jobs or school diplomas to shore them up.

In part because of the increasing advocacy by foster youth groups like Mr. Brown's, many states are expanding efforts to help young adults prepare for life outside the system, offering transitional housing, education, medical care and mentoring as they step out on their own. States are also extending aid for extra years, in some cases to age 21 or even beyond.

"We're finally seeing a recognition by public agencies that they have a responsibility to this population beyond the age of 18," said Gary Stangler, director of Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a foundation in St. Louis that is helping to organize foster youth boards and offers matched savings accounts as well as job aid in 10 states. "In our society, most 18-year-old kids aren't ready to be thrust into the world."

Long in the shadows, the plight of aging out foster youths — some 24,000 a year nationwide who fail to be adopted and usually leave court-monitored care at 18 — is gaining new attention, as youths speak out and research reveals the numbers who end up in homeless shelters, jail and long-term poverty.

California, spurred by the lobbying of the country's largest and most powerful group of former foster children, the California Youth Connection, plans to provide 1,200 transitional housing units, and support counseling, for young adults emerging from care.

In New York City, as part of a wider effort to fight homelessness, the state and city are creating 200 apartments for foster care veterans with special needs. Several private agencies are expanding their programs, as well.

Washington and Iowa have recently joined at least 17 other states, including New York, that allow youths under some circumstances to remain in foster care until age 21. The move keeps the youths under the protection of a court that can press for aid to which they may be entitled into their twenties but is not always offered by overwhelmed state agencies.

But a universal option to remain in foster care until age 21, which is supported by the American Bar Association and many experts, has been hampered by a lack of money. The large federal subsidies that help pay for the system's courts, lawyers and social workers are provided only up to the age of 18, or 19 for those finishing high school.In Illinois, where nearly half of foster children now stay to 21, the extra years are paid for by the state. Early studies by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago indicate that those who remain are faring better than those who leave at 18.

But it is too soon, scholars say, to know how much difference all the new efforts will make in the lives of children who have suffered abuse or neglect and separations from their families.

In Michigan, nearly 500 youths age out annually, usually at 18. A study of 264 former foster children, released in October by psychologists at Wayne State University, showed how poorly many had fared.

Youths from Detroit and two surrounding counties who aged out in 2002 and 2003, mainly African-American, were surveyed three and a half years after they left care. Seventeen percent had stayed in the streets or in shelters for an average of two months each. Some 33 percent had spend long periods "couch surfing" with friends or relatives.

Four in ten were high school graduates. The average youth had been unemployed half the time since leaving care; most jobs were in fast food, averaging just $600 per month. More than one in four males had spent time in jail.

Under a 1999 federal law that provides some "independent living" assistance to age 21, many aged-out youths can get financial aid, including up to $1,000 to help rent an apartment and up to $5,000 a year for those enrolled in college or training schools.

"If it weren't for these programs, I'd probably be in a shelter and I'd have to drop out of school," said Stacey Kline, 21, who left Detroit's foster system at 18. Ms. Kline has been an

active leader in the city's youth boards and is now in college, hoping to someday run a home for aged-out youths.

Still, for Ms. Kline it has been two steps forward, one step back: she recently borrowed emergency money from the Jim Casey program to help her rent a new apartment after, she said, an angry ex-boyfriend vandalized her previous apartment.

In other common patterns, many youths are eager to sever ties with the child welfare bureaucracy, some squander their limited aid and others are in no shape to take advantage of these benefits.

Michael Morris, 21, says he regrets forfeiting his transitional aid. Born to teenage drug users, he was in foster care in Detroit from the age of six months, drifting through dozens of private and group homes.

Though he had never even met his parents, Mr. Morris said, "I wanted a family and I wanted to be with my parents no matter whether they were on drugs." Before he turned 18 and exited foster care, he met his sister and mother for the first time and decided to move in with his mother without the consent of the court, thus losing transitional rent and school subsidies.

He later joined one of the emerging foster youth boards in Detroit and received some matching money for what he saved while working as a security guard.

But living with his mother did not last long. Mr. Morris then tried sharing apartments, but the roommates did not pay their share of the rent. He became unemployed and recently arrived at the crisis center of Covenant House in Detroit, where he shared a barren room with two other homeless youths.

"I hope to be out by March," Mr. Morris said. "I got a good lead on a job at Popeye's," he added, which would pay $7.25 an hour. Through the matched savings program, he hopes to rent his own apartment and enroll in community college.

The growing advocacy by foster children themselves has done more than anything else to draw the attention of state and national officials, said Robin Nixon, director of the National Foster Care Coalition.

In Michigan, Marianne Udow, director of human services, said one of her first acts after taking office in January 2004 was to meet with youth boards to ask for advice.

"I left that meeting feeling that the whole system was broken," Ms. Udow said. The youth

boards later issued 15 recommendations for improving the system and lobbied the governor and legislators. Some suggestions were accepted, including making sure that all foster children get a certified copy of their birth certificate and a Social Security card and help obtaining driver's licenses.

Other suggestions would be more costly and remain under discussion, including offering free college tuition, giving former foster children cars being auctioned by the state and giving all the option to remain in care to 21.

But the youths also made it clear they believed that the problems start when the state removes children from their parents — sometimes too readily — and moves them away from relatives, friends and familiar schools.

Their first recommendation was that foster youths should have a say whenever changes in their status were considered. Their second was to provide them help maintaining ties with their birth families and hometown friends.

The state created a task force with youths on every panel. One top recommendation, the automatic extension of Medicaid coverage to age 21, has just been put into effect. The State Housing Development Authority has also allocated $3 million for rent subsidies, whose recipients will also be eligible for regular mental health and other services.

At the same time, Ms. Udow said, the state is working to reduce the frequency with which children are removed from their parents and trying to keep more children with relatives and in the same schools. The state is in settlement talks with the advocacy group Children's Rights, which brought a suit accusing Michigan of providing inadequate protection and support to children in its care.

For the hundreds who have joined, the youth boards, with their weekly meetings and election of officers, have offered personal breakthroughs as much as a way to influence policy.

"When we come together it's like family," said Alice Harris, a 22-year-old mother of three children who lived in a home for unwed mothers when she entered foster care, then ran away at 16 and survived on the streets for more than a year.

More recently Ms. Harris has lived with a boyfriend, received welfare and become certified as a nurse's assistant. She has become heavily involved with her local youth board in central Detroit, getting elected as an officer and lobbying in the state capital.

When she attended her first board meeting two years ago, she said, “I didn’t want to leave.”

“We were just gossiping, and I made friends, some of them worse off than I was.”

Chilton Brown, who says he “acted out” during his 15 years in foster care, has benefited from the new aid programs in Michigan but also illustrates how hard it can be to turn things around.

Mr. Brown gained confidence as a public spokesman, especially for the special challenges facing gay youths like himself, and has worked as a trainer of new foster parents. He entered Wayne State University with financial aid and aspirations to become a social worker. He took advantage of the matched savings program to buy a car.

But he has also lost a series of jobs, could not keep up payments on his car, lost his home when a relative moved away and has missed the last two semesters of college. He has spent the last three months living in Covenant House.

“I got too adapted to having other people take care of me,” he said in the sparse double room he shares. Now Mr. Brown’s belongings are stuffed into one suitcase, and two large plastic shopping bags.

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