

Tough future for teens 'aging out' of foster care

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Some teens 'age out' of foster care with no supports in place.

For most teen-agers, 18 is a magical year.

High school graduation, voting, first full-time jobs, college. New freedoms.

But for nearly 1,103 Pennsylvania teens in foster care, reaching that milestone age may mean no more home, no more financial support and at times no good plan for the future.

Many teens in foster care -- 25,000 nationally -- 'age out' of the system when they turn 18 but research has found as they face the world alone many are winding up homeless, unemployed, dealing with mental health issues or trouble with the law.

In Dauphin County, looking at the latest numbers available, 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

Imagine some 18 year old you know suddenly making important life decisions all alone.

Some teens in foster care have faced disruptions in their young lives, living with various families, which means changing schools, changing relationships and putting them at greater odds of not learning the skills needed to be self-sufficient and independent.

These are forgotten kids with no permanent adult in their life, and in many cases, no safety net to catch them if they fall.

Fortunately advocates such as Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children and its Porch Light Project, has been shining a light on issues related to the foster care system. It will be releasing a white paper next month that includes strategies for youth in and leaving the foster care system.

One of the challenges to providing strong support is that each county has certain latitude to determine how to handle teens who are aging out. Allegheny County stands out for a program it started a few years ago.

Pittsburgh-area officials wanted the youth to get help, just as someone in a family would, until they reach the age of 24. The county provides housing and a variety of services. One of the options for young adults is to

receive housing in exchange for doing public service projects. The county also provides GED and job preparation classes along with counseling.

What they have seen is very encouraging. The number of teens who left foster care and went on to college jumped from 35 in 2006 to 98 in 2008.

The ultimate goal in Pennsylvania is 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 or nearly half of foster care children sadly are living in an institutional setting.

Some children, of course, are eventually adopted by foster families but others move from one foster family to another or stay in an institution until they reach age 18. It is a sad commentary that kids who have been abused or neglected by no fault of their own wind up with little or no support when they become young adults.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children is recommending that all young adults have the ability to stay in the foster care system until they turn 21 in order to complete their education, any treatment and to get ready for the workforce. 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.

In the end, the real goal is to have good homes for all kids so that when they turn 18 they are talking about their future plans with mom, dad or a loving adult and not a counselor in a homeless shelter.

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