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Life After Foster Care: Services and Policies for Former Foster Youth

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This article argues that interventions targeted to the needs of emancipated foster youth can prevent them from dependency, homelessness, and incarceration. It presents a profile of emancipated foster youth; focuses on their service needs; and, describes three program models addressing these. The data sources are a synthesis of previous research on independent living programs and findings about recently initiated programs. The data presented suggest policy changes to assure that emancipated foster youth continue to receive necessary service for self-sufficiency after they reach the legal emancipation age.

EMANCIPATION TO WHAT?

Over 500,000 children and youth are currently in foster care placements in the United States, an increase of 68 percent since 1982. Although there are no reliable data, it is likely that many who enter foster care will remain in out-of-home placements until they reach 18, the legal age of emancipation in most states. It has been estimated that 20,000 teenagers are discharged from foster care annually in the United States (Barth et. al., 1994). Some will be prepared for independence. Others will simply be released with a duffel bag of household supplies and clothing. Data on 685 youth at the time of their emancipation in the County of Los Angeles present a profile of youth who experience crises, including incarceration, homelessness, victimization, and unemployment Stoner (1998). One estimate of the homeless population is that more than 50 percent end up homeless. Sixty percent leave the government's care without a high school diploma (Mech et. al.,

1994). This turning point comes at the conclusion of a childhood in which they suffered some sort of trauma associated with parental neglect, abuse or their own misconduct.

The United States government enacted the *Independent Living Initiative* in 1986 as the legislative framework for states to develop services that adolescents should receive before the state discharges them from foster care (CIS, 1986). This program has remained in force and nearly doubled its funding level to \$70 million in 1996. The primary objective of independent living programs is to prepare foster youth to function in society without depending on public assistance (California Department of Public Social Services, 1996). After twelve years of implementing the Independent Living Program, and a doubling of resources, uncertainty remains about how to achieve the goal of self-sufficient independence in the face of thousands of emancipating foster youth. Numerous states have creatively used independent living resources to subsidize their preparation and skill development for youth leaving foster care, provide support services before and after they leave, and even provide transitional housing assistance. Nevertheless, the goal of assuring a smooth and successful transition from foster care to self-sufficiency remains elusive for a significant proportion of former foster youth who have a difficult time making the transition to self-sufficiency (Cohen, 1992). Too many remain among the most high-risk youth and continue to enter the depths of poverty, disease, homelessness and incarceration. Critics of the public child welfare system frequently note that the system fails foster youth most in the end.

STRATEGIC PREVENTION

Few opportunities for strategic prevention are as clearly manifested as those directed to emancipated foster youth. Their personal histories of abuse, neglect and life in out-of-home placements have left them among the most vulnerable populations in the nation. Many achieve the personal skills and competencies associated with independence. Some have been lucky. However, many will not achieve self-sufficiency without supports and resources beyond their legal emancipation.

This article suggests that after-care interventions structured around transitional housing for former foster youth can prevent

them from becoming dependent on public assistance, homeless, ill or entering the adult criminal justice system. Indeed, the end-point of discharge from foster care may offer the last opportunity for intervention with people whose entire life circumstances have placed them at high-risk for failure and misfortune. The article focuses on the service and transitional needs of emancipated foster youth, and describes several programs that are addressing these.

The correlation between homelessness and a foster care history has been well documented. Studies assess this correlation from two perspectives. The first examines homelessness and other outcomes for youth who have been discharged from foster care. In a national study, an estimated 3 percent of foster youth in a given year had no housing available after leaving foster care (Shelter Partnership, 1996). This percentage is low because it does not include youth who emancipate to housing arrangements that are so precarious as to render them homeless in a short time. For example, a survey of 48 youths who were emancipated from foster care in Los Angeles County found that 37 percent planned to live with relatives, including 6 percent in the home of their birth parents. These are some of the homes from which the youth had been removed by the County. Others planned to stay with friends, including those whom they were dating. For numerous reasons, these arrangements did not all last long (Los Angeles County, 1995).

The second perspective considers the long-term effects of foster care. A growing body of research demonstrates that former foster youth are over represented among samples of homeless men and women. National studies report finding that from 15 to 39 percent of homeless adults surveyed have experienced foster care placements during their childhood. Most researchers do not argue that foster care experiences cause homelessness, but rather that "foster care has an impact on personal risk factors that may eventually lead to homelessness." (Roman & Wolfe, 1997). Foster youth, particularly those who remain in the system through their teenage years, are likely to have experienced a range of traumatic events, whether they endured physical or sexual abuse, neglect or family dysfunction. Consequently, these youth may not be emotionally prepared for the challenge of adult living in addition

to other skill deficits they may have due to the instability of placement in "the system".

Although the high incidence of homelessness among former foster youth is tragic, it appears to be preventable. Because their needs have become so apparent, some organizations across the nation have begun to address them. There is considerable programming to help prepare youth for emancipation. Newer efforts are focusing on service to youth leaving foster care, particularly in the development of transitional housing. These programs demonstrate the principle that attention to the needs of these youth is growing into an array of service interventions and resources that have the potential to reverse the existing pattern of failure among their ranks.

PROFILES OF FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

The population of youth leaving foster care is not monolithic. Approximately one-half do not become homeless, incarcerated or dependent on public assistance. Therefore, one-half have acquired enough social and life skills, and possibly sufficient social supports, to succeed in their plans to live independently. But for the other half, it is clear that many have psychosocial barriers to overcome before they can successfully acquire the educational, job-related and other skills necessary to succeed in adulthood.

Cook (1988) identified at least four distinguishable categories of emancipated foster youth: 1) those who obtained some life skills and need minimal assistance in making the transition; 2) those who had multiple placements, or have behavior and/or emotional problems, including runaway behavior, or are unable to live in a family setting, and have no viable placement alternatives; 3) those who fall between these two extremes; and, 4) youth who have developmental disabilities.

Studies of youth who have grown up in foster care are scarce (Barth, 1990; Cook & Ansell, 1986; Courtney, et. al., 1999; Stoner, 1998). Numerous researchers have tried to capture this population in order to understand its needs and characteristics. Most have demonstrated the difficulty of obtaining interviews with people who are no longer receiving services or legally connected to the

public welfare system. More data are available about youth who are preparing to leave foster care because of their involvement with services.

One study identified 55 young adults discharged from foster care in the San Francisco Bay area. This sample of former foster youth were found to be struggling with ill health, poor education, severe housing problems, substance abuse and criminal behavior. Barth (1990) cautioned that the youth in the sample may even have been surviving more ably than the many foster youth whom he could not reach. A striking finding of this study was that all youth had high depression scores on the *Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale*.

A larger study was completed at the same time that Barth reported his findings. This was a national evaluation of the federal independent living initiative but it included data on youth after emancipation. It developed estimates of the characteristics and outcomes of older youth discharged from foster care. The study also described the comparative relationship between outcomes for those youth who did and did not receive independent living services before discharge. It found that all discharged foster youth fared worse than their general population cohort in terms of stability, employment, unplanned parenthood and economic self-sufficiency (Cook & Ansell, 1991). This evaluation found that youth exiting foster care had a number of significant problems and needs that interfered with their ability to lead productive adult lives.

The study found that 66% (17,000) did not complete high school; 39% (13,000) had job experience; 38% some form of emotional disturbance; 17% had experienced early pregnancy; 17% had abused drugs; 9% had health problems; 58% had three or more different living arrangements; 3% reported no available housing options; 47% handicapped (38% of whom were diagnosed as emotionally disturbed); and, 45% had at least one runaway episode. Nevertheless, the evaluation did note that the type of skills training encouraged by Public Law 99-271, the Independent Living Initiative, was positively related to outcomes, particularly when the skill areas of money management, credit, education and employment were provided in combination with high school completion, regardless of skills training and

involvement with extended family members before and after emancipation.

Most recently, Piliaven et al. (1998) have begun to report their findings from *The Wisconsin Study of Youth Aging Out of Out-Of-Home Care: A Portrait of Children About to Leave Foster Care*. In that study, only two-fifths of the sample were employed 12 to 18 months after leaving foster care. Even those who were employed, on average, earned less than a full-time worker paid the minimum wage. This was not surprising given their limited education. Fifty-five percent had completed high school and only 9 percent were enrolled in post-secondary education or training. When they needed medical care, they could not obtain it. Their housing situation was highly insecure with 14% of the males and 10% of the females reporting at least one episode of homelessness. Many of youth in the sample experienced situations dangerous to their well being, e.g., physical victimization. Eighteen percent experienced post-discharge incarceration. These findings augment earlier studies that depict circumstances of former foster youth that are not indicative of a successful transition to independence.

The County of Los Angeles emancipation court order forms for 685 youth (1998) portrayed a similarly precarious profile of youth leaving foster care. Only 48% had an educational status that would enable them to compete for jobs that are above the minimum wage. Twenty-nine percent completed high school; 3% received a General Education Diploma, and 16% had enrolled in college. Only one-third had plans for employment when they emancipated, and 12% had made arrangements to live independently. All of their housing arrangements were unstable (Stoner, 1998).

After reviewing available empirical data about former foster youth, the program developers for the Bridges to Independence Program in the County of Los Angeles designated six categories of youth for purposes of identifying appropriate and needed post-emancipation services. These are as follows:

Group 1 youth are high achievers and are highly motivated to succeed. They require limited support in their efforts to complete their education, develop their careers, and maintain emotional stability.

Group 2 youth, the largest cohort of emancipated youth, are motivated and competent but still need extensive transitional housing and services to achieve independent living skills and status.

Group 3 youth have problems with substance abuse and behavior which create more severe barriers to achieving success and are in need of the most intensive type of services. These youth often have emotional problems and severe problems with substance abuse.

Group 4 youth have diagnoses of severe and persistent mental illness (schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, organic brain syndrome), or are developmentally disabled. They are best served in the mental health and disability systems where the priority is to serve people with these conditions.

Group 5 youth are those who are in the corrections system, e.g., probation departments. In most jurisdictions, these youth are not considered to be in the public child welfare system, despite their age and history of out-of-home placement.

Group 6 youth may be characterized as non-participants and tend to disappear from the public child welfare system information systems within six months after emancipation. Many of these youth are successful and are married, in the armed forces, or self-sufficient. Others resist service outreach effort no matter how attractive. Some seek services several years after they emancipate.

Numerous subpopulations of emancipated foster youth are served and specifically targeted for service by providers. It is important to identify subpopulations among emancipated youth to ascertain their special needs as well as whether they are falling through service gaps because of insufficient attention.

There are a growing number of programs available for pregnant or parenting youth. However, most of these are lacking in two respects. Few, if any, are specifically targeted to emancipated youth, so these youth are in competition for limited affordable living units for young women with children. Secondly, there are extremely few programs for single parents with more than one child, especially more than two children.

Gay, lesbian and transgender youth may generally blend into the population of all emancipated foster youth, but there is growing recognition that they are over represented in foster

care because they are more likely to be rejected by their families. These youth are dealing with highly sensitive identity issues at a developmental stage when all youth are struggling with identity and peer acceptance. Some service providers and advocates contend that gay, lesbian and transgender youth need specialized services. Others claim that they do not need to be served apart from other adolescents but they do require greater sensitivity by staff and service providers. These youth comprise a substantial part of the homeless youth population so preventive initiatives targeted to emancipated foster youth must take their situations into account.

What each of these groups has in common is their need for some form of post-emancipation support. Group 1 youth, despite their intellectual drive and personal motivation, still need a base of financial and emotional support. Group 2 youth remain competent and capable of functioning in a stable manner even though they are less fortunate and have psychological and emotional problems. Their greatest tangible problem is that they lack the security of permanent housing and education with the promise of a successful career. Group 3 youth, the smallest cohort of emancipated youth in one large survey, are beset by complicated personal and social situations that prevent independent living. Groups 4 and 5 need attention and services from systems that focus on their special circumstances. The specter of homelessness hovers in the lives of all former foster youth in each group. Wherever they fall on the independence continuum, emancipated foster youth, with limited connection to family and community, may not progress to responsible adulthood without the extra tangible and emotional supports that permanent families and identifiable communities offer young adults.

SERVICE NEEDS

As noted, all youth exiting foster care do not need the same type of services. Any personal or group needs assessment must take into account the fact that an extensive range of resources, skills, competencies and other personal attributes are necessary for adult self-sufficiency. The lengthiness of such a list renders it almost meaningless without a classification system.

Several researchers have classified these skills and needs into a dichotomy between tangible and intangible areas. Tangible skills are those necessary for the acquisition, utilization or allocation of resources and include: locating housing, education, vocations, money management, housekeeping, personal hygiene, understanding the law, job seeking and retention, parenting, emergency and safety capabilities. Intangible skills are those functional capacities needed for everyday living and include: decision-making, problem solving, planning, communicating, interpersonal relationships, time management, self-esteem, confronting anger and past losses, handling rejection and preparing for emancipation and rejection (Cook, 1994; Hahn, 1994; Algate et. al., 1990).

This array of tangible and intangible skills and needs for transition to adulthood has been translated into identifiable service outcomes. Mech (1994), Jacklitsch and Beyer (1990), and Maluccio et. al (1990) have generally noted five common outcome measures: education, employment, housing/living arrangements, support network, and cost to the community.

There are limited available data input from these youth, themselves, regarding their service needs. An evaluation of the County of Los Angeles Homeless Foster Youth Program requested 36 youth to rank the services available to them on a scale. The following services were considered "extremely useful" or "useful": case management, health and dental care, employment assistance, permanent housing, group and individual counseling, and educational guidance (Stoner, 1996).

One study of an intensive service delivery program model tested in Maryland described the unmet needs of the population, despite the fact that it was an extremely thorough independent living program. The study found that most youth improved significantly in the areas of independent living, employment and social network skills, when compared to a control group. However, they did not grow significantly in psychosocial functioning, which describes such items as self-image, peer relationships, adult relationships, self-control of actions, motivation, handling the learning demands of school and home, learning style, expression and handling of feelings (Timberlake et. al., 1987).

This summary analysis of the research on service needs of emancipated youth indicates that there are several proposed aggregations of skills and attributes that provide an adequate foundation for emancipation. The combination of five skills (jobs, housing, peer relationships, money management, and, decision-making) is stressed.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SERVICES AVAILABLE TO FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

An evolving core of providers has begun to develop transitional housing services for former foster youth. The concept of supportive housing prevalent among many homeless service providers is being applied in this delivery context. Three basic housing types are being used: apartment buildings, scattered site apartments, and congregate living facilities. No existing program has emerged as a model for replication, but there appears to be a trend among providers to view scattered site apartments as more appealing to emancipated youth who, in many cases, have just been released from institutional settings, as well as a better learning environment for the development of adult independent living skills (Shelter Partnership, 1995). Presentation of these service models is limited by the fact that no solid research about their effectiveness has been reported. This is an important subject for future research. The program descriptions presented suggest directions for policy and program development, and research.

These three alternative supportive housing models present a basis for comparison.

CONGREGATE LIVING

The Neon Center for Youth in Chicago, Illinois is a 35-bed dormitory available to 18 to 20 year olds who may remain for up to one year. The program operates a Dairy Queen business franchise, providing employment experience for residents. A drop-in center is operated 11 hours a day for youth ages 10 and older, providing support services and food. Neon Street also operates a licensed group home for youth 14 to 17 years old. Residents of transitional housing must have jobs and bank their earnings. This program functions as the end of a continuum of care for foster

youth. This close coordination of so many facets of care creates a supportive environment where younger and older children can interact in positive ways (Interagency Council on the Homeless, 1994). One problem with this dormitory model is that is unlikely to appeal to emancipated youth because of its resemblance to earlier institutional settings that they may have experienced. The emphasis on group living may also not be conducive to mastering independent living skills. The business franchise integrated into the program offers a replicable example for providers.

APARTMENT BUILDINGS

Homes for the Homeless, a network of four facilities located in and around New York City, targets children and their families, with most households headed by a mother (mean age 19). Most of the women have experienced domestic violence, substance abuse and/or inadequate health care. The facilities house from 83 to 242 families in one-bedroom efficiencies or apartments.

The program does not require mothers to participate in social service programs, but seeks to motivate their voluntary participation through services for the children. It is unclear whether the use of this model of very large facilities is useful for emancipated foster youth. It is possible that the community which can be created in a large program site may be useful in the process of gaining independence, but it may not permit sufficient personal growth. However, this type of community might be valuable for emancipated parents who can benefit from the sharing opportunities available in a large community (Interagency Council on the Homeless, 1994).

SCATTERED SITE APARTMENTS

Bridges to Independence, a collaborative effort in the County of Los Angeles between the Weingart Foundation, the Department of Children and Family Services and a number of well-established non-profit providers to youth, offers the most comprehensive model of scattered site housing for emancipated youth in the United States. With a \$10.7 million grant from the Weingart Foundation and \$10 million from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the program enables the Department of Children and Family Services to serve up to 300

emancipated youth at a time for up to 18 months. The housing is in scattered sites and selection criteria are based on proximity to community colleges, transportation, shopping and safety. Youth are required to either work, participate in job training or attend school, as well as participate in life skills learning sessions, and save their money. They are also expected to abide by rules and regulations governing household management, social behavior and substance use/abuse. This program builds upon what youth have experienced in the Independent Living Program.

The Bridges to Independence Program housing model is presently the largest and most comprehensive service system targeted to emancipated foster youth in the United States. Its service plan has been designed to meet the respective needs of Groups 1, 2, and 3.

It provides scholarship and other limited support to Group 1 youth. Youth are assisted with linkages to neighborhood churches and recreational programs, funds for books, clothing, transportation to and from college, and places to stay during holiday breaks, as well as job assistance and mentoring. Twenty-three youth have received college scholarships directly from the program. Others are attending colleges and universities with direct scholarship funds from their schools.

The transitional housing scattered site facilities and services are targeted to the Group 2 youth. Group 1, who need more intensive case management and services than the transitional housing model can provide, have access to more structured congregate housing for at-risk youth such as Covenant House. Many of these youth have substance abuse or mental health problems, and may have been on the streets within the first year after emancipation. Bridges to Independence has completed two years of a five-year grant. The outcomes of this program are being carefully monitored because it has the potential to serve as a replicable model of post-emancipation service.

Current research on the limited range of post-emancipation services indicates that most providers focus on tangible areas of employment, education, financial planning, and locating housing. Fewer providers attend to the intangible areas related to identity, trust, self-esteem, decision-making and healthy relationships. If the supportive transitional housing models are to meet these

more personal needs, the providers will have to augment their services with trained mental health counselors who are prepared to focus on the individual psychodynamic issues of emancipated foster youth.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Most independent living services are offered for youth under the age of eighteen. Greater policy attention needs to be directed to the special needs of those who, having reached their legal majority, upon discharge, are formally emancipated from "the system". A service and policy directive focused on transitional housing and services for discharged foster youth, exemplified by the program models described in this article, may prevent them from advancing in "the system" before they experience the drugs, exploitation, physical danger and trauma of life on the streets, or in jails and prisons. The most recent data about former foster youth, reported in Wisconsin and the County of Los Angeles, clearly suggest that a significant proportion of them experience serious difficulty making the transition to self-sufficiency.

In 1989 the Child Welfare League of America developed and published standards for independent living services. Based upon recommendations from youth service providers, research on independent living initiatives, and advocates, these provide the framework for the provision of opportunities to prepare adolescents for self-sufficiency. Aftercare is included as one of the seven services and skill categories needed by youth who have left foster care (Child Welfare League of America, 1989). Aftercare occurs when the emancipating agency assists with financial need, employment counseling and support, crises counseling, emergency shelter, housing assistance, information and referral, community service opportunities, peer support programs and advocacy.

The importance of these aftercare services suggests that legal measures be taken to require, or assure, that emancipated youth continue to receive services necessary for self-sufficiency after court emancipation. Such court directives might require that a contractual plan be established between an emancipating youth and the public child welfare agency. At the legislative level, the federal Independent Living Initiative might be amended to

mandate that local programs continue services to all youth until they acquire independent resources and skills.

This consideration raises the question whether the age 18 is appropriate for emancipation from foster care. The Child Welfare League has proposed that the legal emancipation age be extended to 21. Related to the age extension, the Child Welfare League has also proposed that foster care eligibility continue until there is documented verification that a youth has been provided post-high school educational and/or vocational experiences.

Barth has recommended four major policy changes: 1) volunteer mentors; 2) incentives for foster parents; 3) educational opportunity; and, 4) maintenance of health benefits through Medicaid.

Public welfare departments can promote the introduction of waivers or changes of laws to allow former foster parents to be paid to take in youth during school holidays. Investment in better training for the caretakers of foster youth, whether they are foster parents or group care providers, will also enrich outcomes for the youth in their care. With after-care services and resources, foster youth would have a greater possibility to complete high school or attend post-secondary education or training. The opportunities for educational and career advancement, critical to compete in the job market, are significantly limited for emancipated foster youth who must immediately concern themselves with financial independence.

The consistency of findings across studies regarding the high rate of depression among former foster youth clearly indicates that their mental health needs be considered paramount. Supportive housing programs focused on tangible skills and resources are not addressing this critical element of preparation for adult independent living.

Child care is another critical component for young parents, primarily young women, in their struggle to finish high school, obtain post-secondary degrees or job training, or finding employment. This predicament informs the entire debate about welfare dependency. Housing programs that serve single parents tend to provide child care either on-site, or in the form of a stipend to a third-party provider. However, such child care ends

when parents leave transitional housing programs once they are otherwise prepared for independent living. This problem needs to be addressed in the larger context of public policy on welfare dependency and work.

This argument for policy and legal changes to enable the advancement of post-emancipation services includes an exploration of resources that are available for such a broad initiative. Two primary federal funding sources are available, the Supportive Housing Program and the Transitional Living Program. The Supportive Housing Program, operated by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, promotes the development of supportive housing and services to assist homeless persons in the transition from homelessness to independence. These funds may also be used for limited supportive permanent housing for persons with disabilities. Under the McKinney Act, which governs the program, an individual under the care and supervision of a state supported institution, including foster care, cannot be deemed homeless. Nor are all emancipated youth deemed homeless. However, a youth emancipated from foster care who does not have the means or resources to support him/her self, can be considered homeless and eligible for the Supportive Housing Program.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services Runaway and Homeless Youth Transitional Living Program supports programs which assist older homeless youth (not less than 16 and not more than 21) in making a successful transition to self-sufficient living and to prevent long-term dependency on public welfare and social services. The stated purposes of the Transitional Living Program are clearly consistent with the goal of helping emancipated foster youth make a successful transition into adulthood: providing stable secure housing, independent living skills training, education and counseling regarding substance abuse, access to health and mental health treatment, employment training and location (U.S. Federal Register, 1996).

In addition to these major federal funding sources, local public agencies such as community development agencies, may have funding available for this population. For example, the Weingart Foundation in Los Angeles, which has committed substantial

funding to this issue in a collaborative effort between the county's public child welfare agency and several non-profit agencies, stands out as a replicable model for other local jurisdictions.

The availability of these resources, coupled with a national commitment to support emancipated foster youth until they can demonstrate self-sufficiency, suggest strong potential for effective intervention with this vulnerable population. Emancipation may be the last chance to intervene with this identifiable group of youth who are at risk of continuing dependency. The broad implication of these policy recommendations is that the community cannot be relieved of its jurisdictional and moral obligation to foster youth until it can be demonstrated that they have obtained a stable living situation as evidenced by their ability to obtain and maintain full employment and permanent housing.

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