

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF **SOMEONE TO CARE, A PLACE TO BELONG:
ADOLESCENTS AND FOSTER CARE IN MASSACHUSETTS**

I. INTRODUCTION

DID YOU KNOW?

Every year in this state roughly 500 teens age out of foster care upon turning 18. What happens to teens raised by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts?

The Eagle-Tribune (in a three-part series August 18-20, 2002) reported that:

- 30% of the boys in foster care end up in prison
- 40% don't complete high school
- 50% of the girls have babies out of wedlock
- 50% end up unemployed

Nationally, the outcome statistics for teens once in foster care are as alarming, with a recent study reporting that

12 to 18 months after leaving care:

- 27% of the males and 10% of the females had been incarcerated
- 33% were receiving public assistance
- 37% had not finished high school
- 50% were unemployed

(Courtney, M., Piliavin, I., Grogan-Kaylor, A., and Nesmith, A. *Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood: Outcomes 12 to 18 Months After Leaving Out-of-Home Care*, Institute for Research on Poverty, Madison, University of Wisconsin-Madison, July 1998.)

Three out of ten homeless are former foster care youth.

(Resources On: *Foster Care and Homeless Youth*, Casey Family Programs, Online, July 2001.)

GOOD THINGS ARE HAPPENING . . .

In 2002, Massachusetts received \$2.6 million in Chafee Foster Care Independence Program funds, and it used some of the funding not only to enhance its Adolescent Outreach Program by tripling its staffing, but the Department of Social Services also launched three new initiatives – the Living Support Program, the Discharge Support Program, and the Transitional Living Program – aimed at assisting teens in foster care and young adults with housing, education, and vocational training.

In 2002 the legislature appropriated \$1 million for college financial aid grants targeted at youth who have aged out of foster care. Glenn Daly, director of the Office of Youth Development, Executive Office of Health and Human Services, reported, “the legislation would not have passed if it weren't for the direct involvement of foster youth.” (Daly, Glenn and Gina Fagien, *Foster Care and Youth Development*, Common Ground, November 2002.)

II. THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Conventional wisdom knows that the average 18-year-old is unprepared to live independently. Even those older adolescents who grew up with the incalculable benefits of family and/or stability cannot become self-sufficient overnight – nor are they expected to by their families or by the state.

Yet research examining the ability of the nation's child welfare systems to successfully transition foster care youth into self-sufficient, well-cared-for, adult-functioning individuals shows that children who age out of foster care systems are still at risk of poverty, homelessness, addiction, re-entry into the public welfare system, and adult criminal courts. Moreover, the vulnerable lifestyles which too many of these teens are forced to live substantially increase their risk of sexual exploitation, early parenthood, and a host of health and mental health problems. Yet in most circumstances, Medicaid coverage ends once a youth reaches 18 years of age.

In hopes of reversing those negative outcomes for youth aging out or exiting foster care, the late Senator John H. Chafee of Rhode Island secured enactment of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (jointly referred to as "The Chafee Act"). The Chafee Act seeks to remedy such national failures as those reported by the Government Accounting Office which found that only 18% of all states offered job training, while only 35% of all states offered job placement services to foster care youth transitioning to independent living. (*United States General Accounting Office, Foster Care: Effectiveness of Independent Living Services, November 1999, p. 4.*) Prior to the enactment of the Chafee Act, states were not required to provide essential transition services to youth between the ages of 18 and 21, and consequently many older adolescents fell through the gaping holes of dependency.

III. JOHN H. CHAFEE FOSTER CARE INDEPENDENCE PROGRAM

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (*P.L. 106-169*) were signed into law to address the crises that adolescents experience while in care and during their attempts to transition into independent living.

The Chafee Act not only appropriated additional funding for states, but it also revamped Title IV-E's Independent Living Program and provided states with greater flexibility in their use of funding aimed at assisting the 20,000 youth who annually transition out of foster care and into the legal fiction of independent living.

In addition, the Chafee Act encourages states to:

- provide independent living services to any youth "likely" to remain in foster care even when the teen's permanency goal is reunification or adoption;
- offer room and board to youth who have left foster care but have not yet turned 21; and

- provide Medicaid coverage until 21 to youth who exited foster care at age 18.

Building on the foundation provided by the Chafee Act, Massachusetts state government must continue to innovatively invest in the future of our next generation.

IV. SOLUTIONS WITHIN OUR REACH

Members of the Massachusetts Legislature are urged to consider the policy goals listed below as policy priorities for the 2003-2004 Legislative Sessions. In these tough economic times, it is incumbent upon the Massachusetts State Legislature to hold the most vulnerable children and families of this state harmless from the budget cuts. Although some of the recommendations that follow require new funding, many of them are cost-neutral and require instead a philosophical change in attitude towards adolescents and their service needs while in foster care and after they have “aged out” of or exited the system.

PREVENTION: STRENGTHEN SUPPORTS AND HELP NURTURE RELATIONSHIPS FOR TEENS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Prevention funding should be specifically targeted to adolescent youth in those communities with the highest rate of foster care removal, high school drop out, and juvenile delinquency. Family-focused support services and interventions including counseling, respite, and training in youth development should be available on demand in order to reduce the number of youth who end up in the custody of the state either in foster care or incarcerated. Preventive services like those offered at the Family Resource Program sponsored by Casey Family Services’ partnership with the Lowell Housing Authority builds on a family’s strengths and capacity to identify necessary changes in a manner that respects diversity, facilitates self-sufficiency, and strengthens the community. Funding is needed to replicate this type of program throughout the state.

Family conferences, as a mechanism for conflict resolutions and problem solving, should be made available on demand by the Departments of Probation and of Social Services.

- Funding should be targeted to after-care services designed to help stabilize the family unit when a teen returns home from placement.
- A youth’s caseworkers, child care workers, and foster parents should encourage and assist the youth with efforts to reconnect and/or maintain relationships with family.
- Adult and peer mentors should be available to any teen ever involved with the child welfare system.

PREVENTION: DIVERT YOUTH AND THEIR FAMILIES AWAY FROM CHILDREN IN NEED

OF SERVICES (CHINS) PLACEMENTS AND REDUCE THE NEED FOR FOSTER CARE

CHINS is a front door for many youth into the foster care system – all too often it only opens one way. Family-based assessments followed by family and individual counseling should be readily available to a family member who has filed or who is contemplating filing a CHINS petition. Such services will increase the percentage of CHINS cases that are successfully diverted.

RECRUIT, PREPARE, AND SUPPORT FOSTER PARENTS FOR TEENS

The Department of Social Services should expedite and expand plans to develop a specialized category of foster homes that is specifically recruited, trained, and supported to care for teenagers. Incentives like respite, an increased boarding rate, flexible funding, and training on the developmental needs of teenagers should be provided to foster parents of teens. Since reunification is the permanency goal for about 47% of youth in Massachusetts between the ages of 12 and 17 (*Massachusetts Department of Social Services, Quarterly Report, FY2002, 4th quarter, p. 31*). These foster parents must also indicate a willingness to work with the birth parents to expedite the youth's return home, when a court deems it safe to do so.

RECRUIT, PREPARE, AND SUPPORT ADOPTIVE PARENTS FOR TEENS

In Massachusetts, adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 have three major service plan goals: reunification, living independently, and long-term substitute care. Strikingly, adoption is not one of the service plan goals set for any significant percentage of this population. Adoption should be promoted as a permanency alternative for older adolescents on a fair and equitable basis with the adoptive parents receiving appropriate incentives, training, counseling, and other post-adoption services supportive of the youth.

INTEGRATE INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS THROUGHOUT A YOUTH'S STAY IN FOSTER CARE

The Department of Social Services should hold foster care agencies accountable for the integration of independent living skills into all aspects of their service provision, and require all direct service providers – caseworkers, foster parents, as well as the independent living coordinators – to assist youth in preparing and planning for their future. This will require a cultural change in most organizations since independent living is traditionally viewed as a service of “last resort” provided by a few specially trained personnel.

IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF FRONT-LINE CHILD CARE WORKERS

A 2001 workforce survey conducted by the Child Welfare League of America, the American Public Human Services Association, and the Alliance for Children and Families confirmed alarming national trends that child welfare organizations have an average 10% vacancy rate, with an average turnover rate of 20% in public state agencies and 40% in the private sector. Workers assigned to group homes and institutions targeted to adolescents in care are required to work long hours without adequate supervisory support, training, or compensation. In Massachusetts, the vacancy rate may be as high as 40

to 45%, according to Hal Gibbler, executive director, Tri-County Youth Programs. (*Children's Voices, Vol. 10, No. 5, September 2001, p. 20.*) Child care workers should be appropriately trained, supervised, and compensated for the important public service they provide.

TARGET EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT AND SERVICES FOR FOSTER CHILDREN

Nationally, over 50% of all youth in foster care who exited a system had not acquired a high school diploma 2_ to 4 years afterwards. In Massachusetts, the statistic is just as dire with the Department of Social Services reporting that adolescents unable to return home and without a foster home placement experience continuous disruption of their education. To attempt to halt the educational roller coaster youth in foster care experience, as a matter of course they should be placed in a foster boarding home in close proximity to their neighborhood or community school, or provided with necessary transportation to minimize the disruption of their education – especially if they experience more than one placement while in care.

CREATE A STATEWIDE SYSTEM OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND JOB PLACEMENT

DSS should greatly enhance its job readiness and job placement program and maximize all efforts to appropriately match and place teens in jobs well before they turn 18.

FURTHER ENHANCE TRANSITIONAL HOUSING SUPPORTS FOR FORMER FOSTER CARE YOUTH

Massachusetts has started building an impressive record of developing creative programming to address the serious housing crisis that young adults confront as they transition from foster care to adulthood. Using Chafee funding, the Department of Social Services recently initiated the Discharge Support Program that covers the costs of certain housing and household expenses for youth aging out of care, and the Transitional Living Program targeted at youth who have left the system but are still in need of housing and other essentials.

COORDINATE MENTAL HEALTH AND EDUCATIONAL SERVICES WITH FOSTER CARE

Coordinated assessments should inform the placement and permanency goals of a youth in foster care.

PROVIDE YOUTH WITH MEDICAID COVERAGE AT LEAST UNTIL THE AGE OF 21

Massachusetts should join the seven states – Arizona, California, Hawaii, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Texas, and Wyoming – that have identified a way to extend health coverage to these vulnerable young adults until the age of 21.

ESTABLISH PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS TO BROADEN OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO ADOLESCENT YOUTH IMPACTED BY THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Massachusetts has recently established several successful public/private partnerships aimed at assisting older adolescents as they transition into adulthood. A Bridge to a Career (ABC) is a successful collaboration between Middlesex College and a private landlord that is providing supportive housing units to youth attending the community college. The Department of Social Services hopes to replicate the ABC Program in each region of the state. Replication will require the formation of new public/private partnerships.

It is our hope that the policy directions discussed above will help inform child welfare debates and lead to new legislation, budgetary items, departmental rules and regulations during the course of this legislative session. Improving an adolescent's chances of succeeding as an adult by offering wraparound services to youth involved with foster care is a non-partisan goal. Let's prove to this generation, before it's too late, that their government and their community really do care about them.

V. IN THEIR OWN WORDS: THE VOICES OF ADOLESCENTS IN FOSTER CARE

"All my life I felt unloved and unwanted – by everyone," Teala says. "But now, there are two people in my life who really care about me." Now a senior at Lowell High School, Teala earns A's and B's and is a member of the math and science club. She also works two part-time jobs in order to save money for college, but still makes time to help out younger kids in need – she tutors first-graders weekly, mentors fellow foster children monthly and routinely advises Casey on how to improve its services. Next year, Teala wants to study computer science at college and hopes to someday run her own consulting business. And later, she says, "I want to have two kids and give them the life that I wanted. They'll know that I care about them, because I'll show them every day."

— Teala, 18

"I was growing up but nobody was teaching me how to grow up. I didn't understand what a helping hand was until I had moved ten times. With every move, I had to start in new schools, make new friends, and try to trust new foster parents and adults." Meanwhile, Mark's early traumas and losses continued to affect him. "I didn't have time to think about why I was in foster care because I concentrating on how to make it in the foster homes."

— Mark, 21

“When I was three years old, I was taken out of my home,” Gary recalls. “I had six brothers and sisters, and all seven of us were placed in different homes. It’s more than just losing your mom and dad, it’s your community, your friends, the school you go to, and a lot of your siblings. Somebody asked me what it’s like to be a foster child. I answered this way: ‘Take the keys to your home and drop the keys on the coffee table and leave all your money and your Rolodex behind. All you have is yourself. And walk out the door. And that more or less is what it’s like to be a foster kid.’”

— Gary Zerola

Attorney, former foster child

“I lived in a foster home in New Bedford once. There were about ten kids in the home, about four kids in each bedroom. There was a room with a pool table. That was cool, but two kids slept in that room around the pool table. [In my current home] I have my own room. There are two foster boys, and the family has two sons. Their sons are older than I am. I now have someone to be a big brother to. I’ve been in this home for seven years. ... It’s my home!”

— Bobby, 17

*In silence she sits all alone by herself,
The only motion is the sound of her breathing.
She will smile at you, a smile so sincere,
That you will never guess that there is
A dark side of her somewhere.*

— Vicky, 15

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