

Graduation: Nightmare for Foster Children?

By Raymond L. Torres (*Norwalk Hour*, 6/12/99)
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The graduation season is a time of celebration and anticipation for hundreds and thousands of the nation's young people and their proud parents. Yet for a growing number of teenagers, "graduation" has become a prelude to disaster.

Each year 20,000 of the nation's 500,000 foster children "graduate" or age-out of foster care. For many this means moving out of their foster homes and out of a system that has provided support in the form of counseling, housing allowances and health care. Too often, all these supports abruptly disappear for foster care youth at age 18—or at high school graduation—whichever comes first in their lives. And too often, for a variety of reasons, there is simply no one in their lives willing or able to help.

Terry, a Virginia teenager, found herself on her own at age 18—several months before she was set to receive her high school diploma. She had no place to call home, and little or no money. Yet she was determined to stay in school and graduate with her class. So, Terry slept in subway stations, hospital emergency rooms and with friends when she could, and every day she returned to school. It is a testament to her courage and determination—and to the help she found through a Virginia non-profit program for homeless youth—that she met not only her goal of graduating from high school, but now also holds a part-time job while attending community college.

No child should ever have to be that brave, that resourceful or that alone.

Teenagers who have weathered neglect, abuse and abandonment at home, followed by years of multiple placements in foster care, may not be ready to fly from the nest at the magical age of 18. How could they be? It's very likely that the trauma and uncertainty that has followed them through life has delayed their social, emotional and educational development. They may look like 18 year olds, but they may be functioning at a much younger age. Most have had little if any opportunity to learn self-confidence, believe in themselves or in others, or build life skills. They are unprepared to fill out a job application, find decent, affordable housing, shop for groceries or pay their bills.

Yet this is what we expect them to do, all without anyone to call upon for advice or help. And all too frequently, they simply cannot cope. A recent study suggests that an alarming number of these youngsters find themselves on the street or in jail: Within 12 to 18 months after leaving care, half of those who left were unemployed; one-fifth of the girls had given birth; more than one-quarter of the boys had been incarcerated; and a third were receiving public assistance.

In contrast, the teenager who has had the benefit of a stable foster home, a long-term relationship with a social worker, and ongoing guidance and encouragement fares a lot better. That teenager takes advantage of job training, scholarships, health coverage or independent living assistance, and makes the transition relatively smoothly.

It doesn't take an economist to see that there is wisdom in investing early in our young people's success, instead of later paying the even greater costs associated with their failure.

My colleagues in the child welfare field share both a concern and a new sense of hope for our foster care youth. It is a hope fueled by a growing level of attention at the national level. President Clinton said in a recent message to the nation, "One important challenge in our foster care system is that many foster children each year leave the system at the age of 18 without the support of an adoptive family or other permanent relationship. These young people who 'age-out' of foster care must make the difficult transition to independence without the emotional, social and financial support that families provide."

Now there is bipartisan support in Congress for a measure that promises to double the federal funding for programs to help these forgotten and vulnerable youth. The measure would provide roughly \$300 million in funding for independent living programs across the nation. It would raise the age of "graduation" from 18 to 21, giving foster teens a little more time to learn what it means to be on their own.

The proposal recognizes that our most vulnerable children must begin early to learn the skills they will need later in life. It acknowledges that we should ensure that there is a caring adult in their lives to help guide them through crises, and that we must provide concrete assistance in health care, housing and other supports until each of them reaches the age of 21.

For most of foster care's problems, especially those surrounding transition into adulthood, there is a solution in which everyone can play a part. Foster parents, mentors, teachers and tutors, coaches, employers—we all can make a difference in a young life.

At this time of year, when so many of our young stand on the threshold of their adult lives, it is all the more important to reach out a helping hand to those less able to step into productive independence.

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