First Lady's Office

MaryEllen McGuire 0823

-Adoption/Foster Care
- Gen
- CAN Event
- Foster Care Event
- Promising Practices
- WH Handouts
- Universe of Players

-Child Care/Kids at Risk
-Children's Health/Folic Acid
-Service/Service Learning
-Service/AmeriCorps 5th Anniversary
-Service/City Year
-International Child Abduction
-International Child Abduction Book
-Women & Girls Book
-Gore Commission Binder
-Gore Commission
-Philanthropy Advisors Binder
-Millennium Projects
-SAT Tour Clips

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THE NATIONAL FOSTER CARE AWARENESS PROJECT

COPY

December 15, 1998

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of our respective organizations, as well as our collaborative work as a part of the National Foster Care Awareness Project, we would like to thank you and the First Lady for your continued interest and support of our nation's young people.

After years of indifference, there has been a great deal of recent attention directed to adequately address the needs and challenges faced by young people in foster care who are making the transition to adulthood. Through the work of our respective foundations, we recognize the need to strengthen systems of support for the estimated 25,000 youth who leave state foster care each year – often with too little preparation to lead productive lives as adults.

We believe that ***now*** is the time to move toward improvement of those systems and policies through effective new approaches and innovative collaborations that will ensure every foster youth's development into a self-sufficient, contributing member of his or her community.

Your willingness to tackle this important challenge will have a positive impact—one that can be easily measured because it affects a very specific number of children. Providing improved economic opportunities for these young people as they leave foster care is an achievable goal for your Administration—and one that, no doubt, could be part of your legacy as President. We look forward to working with you, and offer our experiences, research, and commitment to help in this effort.

Respectfully,

Ruth W. Massinga
Chief Executive Officer
The Casey Family Program

Douglas W. Nelson
President
Annie E. Casey Foundation

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THE NATIONAL FOSTER CARE AWARENESS PROJECT

December 16, 1998

Ms. Nicole Rabner
Office of the First Lady
100 Old Executive Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Nicole:

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with members of the National Foster Care Awareness Project recently. We greatly appreciated the depth of the conversation, and the special interest you and the First Lady have demonstrated on this important issue.

Per your request, our organizations have been working together to provide you with information which we hope will be helpful as you work within the Administration to review the current public policy regarding youth aging out of foster care, and seek to develop an effort that will improve the lives of young people transitioning into adulthood.

Please find enclosed:

- Policy Options to Improve the Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood
- Administrative Steps
- *Universe of Players* - Key National Independent Living Contacts
- Federal Agency Contacts

You had also requested information on promising practices and model programs offering services to youth in transition. The National Foster Care Awareness Project is currently collecting data on programs from across the country and will forward that information under a separate cover.

Again on behalf of my colleagues, thank you so much for your attention to this issue. Please do not hesitate to call me if you have questions about the enclosed. I can be reached at 206-270-4989.

Sincerely,

Susan A. Weiss
Director of Advocacy
The Casey Family Program

THE NATIONAL FOSTER CARE AWARENESS PROJECT

Improving the Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood

Administrative Steps the Federal Government Can Take to Help[1]

Young people in foster care are the proverbial "canary in the coal mine." That is, they are so vulnerable that they are often the first affected when a public system doesn't work very well. The distress of the canary warns that the miners are at risk. When public systems fail children in foster care, they are also failing other vulnerable young people: the effects are just not as immediately apparent.

Almost all public systems touch young people in foster care: education, training, juvenile justice, health care, housing, welfare, substance abuse and mental health, as well as the child welfare system. Just looking at one piece of the puzzle is inadequate and, too often, no one looks at the whole.

The following pages identify specific cross-agency and administrative activities and initiatives to help youth transition from foster care to independent adulthood, using current resources and funding in a more holistic way. These ideas assume no new federal money and no changes in federal law.

Focus Public Attention on the Issues

The issues faced by young people in foster care as they try to move successfully to adulthood (often against great odds) are far below the radar screen of most Americans, including the press. The White House has an unparalleled ability to raise the level of public awareness about this or any other issue. The White House conferences on early childhood development (and the budget and policy initiatives that have resulted from these conferences) illustrate this power. Similarly, Cabinet Secretaries and others Administration officials can use their positions to highlight important policy issues. *Ideas:*

Hold a White House conference that focuses on helping young people in foster care move successfully to adulthood.

Involve juvenile court judges in this conference in a central way since the courts actually place many young people in foster care, and since many children and young people in foster care tangle with the justice system. Identify and highlight

[1] Policy advice provided by Margaret Dunkle, Institute for Educational Leadership.

strategies that recognize that children in foster care have fewer supports and are consequently at greater risk than most other children and that respond by providing an early "stitch in time" or extra support along the way.

(Judges could also be effectively engaged in this issue in ways other than a big conference: for example, through a speech by a high-level Administration official at an appropriate organizational meeting or conference of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, by hosting a White House or Justice-HHS meeting of judges, etc.)

Use children and youth in foster care as the theme of Vice President Gore's "Family Reunion" in the year 2000 or 2001. (The 1999 theme is families and communities.)

Provide one of the Vice President's "Hammer Awards" (for reinventing government) for work that helps young people transition successfully from foster care to adulthood. Or, alternatively, give a special award to an agency, community or state at the conference or "Family Reunion" suggested above.

Work with Andrew Cuomo, Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), to exert leadership concerning homeless youth, expressly including those who have been in foster care. Leadership efforts could include: issuing (with some fanfare) a report on homelessness among youth (making linkages to foster care), getting the word out about promising approaches to address these issues, giving speeches and using the HUD seminar series to highlight the issues.

Events could be hosted by any number of Administration officials including the First Lady or the Second Lady. These high-profile events could engage well-known people who are already involved with these issues (just as Rob Reiner was involved with the White House conferences on early childhood development). A possibility is Monty Roberts of "Horse Whisperer" fame: he and his wife have had many foster children.

Key players at any event should cover a broad spectrum, not just the traditional "child welfare" community. Important players include school/educational leaders (where we would hope these young people *would* be), juvenile justice/law enforcement, faith-based organizations, corporations and "homelessness" leaders (where we hope these young people *will not* be), as well as leaders of all of the systems in between.

Get the Facts Out

Most people don't know the facts about foster care and why it matters to them and their communities. Most officials who run (or legislators who craft) public programs don't understand the degree to which children and youth in foster care are over-represented in the "at-risk" population (however one might define "at-risk" from substance abuse to domestic violence and teen pregnancy). *Ideas:*

Have the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics publish a special report on children and youth in foster care, much as they have done with their "fatherhood" initiative. Include, for example, information about the degree of over-representation of young people in foster care in various populations or programs. Also include, to the extent possible, budget figures about short-term versus long-term costs related to foster care.

Have the Forum use an indicator concerning "foster care" as a "Special Indicator" in their 1999 or 2000 report on *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*, though this will be challenging since so much of the data about foster care is administrative in nature and of relatively poor quality.

These efforts or, for that matter, any "data" effort would highlight the dearth, poor quality and inconsistency across states of information about children and youth in foster care. This could be a very positive result *if* it improved the information available to policy makers and communities alike.

Use the Regulatory Process Creatively to Address "Transition" Issues

Several major pieces of federal legislation recently signed into law by the President *have the potential* to improve the chances that a young person in foster care will move successfully into adulthood.

The Workforce Investment Act (administered by the U.S. Department of Labor) totally revamps the nation's federally-funded job training system. (WIA is especially important for young people "the forgotten half" of whom do not pursue a post-secondary education.)

The major student financial assistance programs for post-secondary education (administered by the U.S. Department of Education) have just been reauthorized by Congress.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is important because many children and youth in foster care spend too little time in any one school to be properly diagnosed, much less receive the services they need to learn and be ready for higher education or the work force.

Ideas:

Instruct the Departments of Labor and Education to write regulations and implement these laws in ways that help young people in foster care use these benefits and services to make a successful transition through school and to adulthood. Ask these departments to identify specific barriers and ways to overcome these barriers within the bounds of the statute.

Especially look at such intensive programs as the Job Corps, a largely residential program that serves more than 60,000 youth (age 14-24) each year, providing such services as basic education, vocational skill training, work experience, counseling, health care and other support services.

The Youth Opportunity Grant Program (in the Workforce Investment Act, $250 million) could also be important, because it focuses on EZ/EC (Empowerment Zones/Enterprise Communities), where there is high poverty, high unemployment and, most likely, also a high percentage of children and youth in foster care.

Identify ways to assure that schools *quickly evaluate* students in foster care for their special education needs, and schools make sure that the resulting *Individual Education Plans (IEPs) follow these young people* when they change schools. For example, use the new coordination provision in IDEA towards this end.

Have a senior Administration official convene a meeting at which these agencies report on their specific plans, including barriers, solutions and time lines. Possible conveners include the Vice President, First Lady, Second Lady or Director of OMB.

Also, involve top policy staff from *other agencies* in this meeting, and have them follow up by suggesting specific administrative or regulatory changes that they might make in the programs that *they* administer.

Push the Departments and States to Use Existing Flexibility in Federal Laws to Help Youth in Foster Care Transition Successfully

Few federal agencies (as well as few communities and states) use this existing flexibility creatively to do more, better, with less. It is always easier, at least in the short run, to continue to fund existing programs, practices and people.

Existing flexibility in federal laws includes, for example:

Being able to waive some aspects of federal education, training, health and welfare laws (often as a "demonstration" program).

The ability of schools and school districts to use up to five percent of their federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funds to coordinate health and social service which has tremendous implications for children in foster care.

HHS's ability to grant waivers to allow states to experiment with federal child welfare programs, using the demonstration authority in the law.

Flexibility concerning Medicaid and CHIP that is available to states (either at their option or by asking for a federal waiver).

Ideas:

Convene knowledgeable practitioners from the field along with the various departmental experts on waivers and flexibility, with the charge of developing a "best practices" or "bright ideas" manual with an emphasis on young people transitioning from foster care.

Train the waiver, "state plan," and flexibility "experts" in each agency about best practices, and make these materials broadly available, e.g., in publications, on the Web, etc.

Provide leadership to encourage states to open their federal Independent Living Program (Title IV-E, $70 million annually) to young people up to age 21. (States can do this at their option, but it costs them money. There is a 50 percent matching requirement after $45 million of the federal funds are spent.)

Have HCFA (the Health Care Financing Agency, which is in charge of Medicaid) aggressively encourage states to expand Medicaid eligibility to all children (not just those who have been in foster care) until their 21st birthday. Specific actions could include, for example: a letter to states from the Medicaid Director or HCFA administrator specifically suggesting that states amend their state Medicaid plans to cover children up to age 21, a "forcing event" (such as a speech by the President or Vice President to the Governors or state Medicaid Directors, or a White House meeting).

These youth (age 18, 19 and 20) would be defined as "children" for Medicaid purposes: the significance of this is that they would be eligible for the more comprehensive EPSDT services, rather than the more limited package of Medicaid services available to adults. (EPSDT= Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment = the "kids" part of Medicaid.)

This expanded coverage for 18-20 year-olds is especially important, given that the new CHIP (Child Health Insurance Program) only covers children until their 19th birthday.

Create a "Re-invention Lab" to Focus on Foster Care Transition

The problems and issues faced by children and youth in foster care are important in their own right. They are also often early-warning signs of systemic failures programs and policies that don't work very well. The Vice President's National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR) has designed "re-invention labs" throughout government to test ways to make government work better, cost less and get results that matter to the American public. *Ideas:*

Explore having an interdepartmental "re-invention lab" to test successful interdepartmental, interagency and intergovernmental ways to help young people in foster care transition to successful adulthood.

Building on the NPR focus on "putting customers first," involve young people who are (or have been) in foster care as well as practitioners in the design of this re-invention lab.

Use foster care as a test case (or "model") to define meaningful interdepartmental performance measures under the Government Performance and Results Act.

Mine lessons that have been learned in the relatively small Foster Care Independent Living Program (created in 1986) and identify specific ways to apply these lessons more broadly.

Highlight and Replicate What Works

Too often, people across agencies don't have models of success. They need to know what works to help young people transition successfully from foster care to adulthood. *Ideas:*

Have the involved federal departments identify *and disseminate* "best practices" to help young people in foster care transition successfully. Some of these "best practices" will involve asking for federal waivers; others will not.

Provide technical assistance through the departments, their "TA contractors" and/or the WEB giving specific advice about how to use existing flexibility to serve young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood successfully.

In instances where federal law requires states and agencies to develop "plans," train agency staff so that they can suggest specific ways these plans can effectively address foster care "transition" issues.

Push for Comprehensive Plans That Work for These Young People

Again and again, we hear about children and youth in foster care who have multiple case workers and multiple but piecemeal "plans." For example, the same young person could have one "case manager" in the child welfare system, another in the health system, a probation officer in the juvenile justice system, and a disability that requires the school system to develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Yet, these multiple case workers have typically never even met one another, much less worked collaboratively to develop a sensible road map for the young person in foster care. *Ideas:*

Have the departments identify specific "plans" for young people *(and their families)* that are required or encouraged by various federal laws.

Scrutinize "confidentiality" requirements and provisions in federal law. And then identify and disseminate ways for agencies to share key information without violating the rights or privacy of young people in foster care.

Next, develop and disseminate specific suggestions for coordinating these plans more effectively. Issues that are likely to arise include: different goals and accountability measures for the various plans, the lack of incentives for coordinating across agencies, different timing and reporting requirements, different professional training of the case managers/"planners," etc.

Train professionals in the foster care system so that they are better equipped to coordinate these multiple "case management" systems.

Develop a Web site that a case manager or a young person in foster care could use to identify possible sources of support (including, but not limited to, funding) as he or she moves into adulthood.

Explore modifying the content and administration of the written case plans for each child in foster care (as required by federal law since 1980) to make these plans more coordinated and comprehensive across departments, systems, programs and levels of government. In these plans, place an increased emphasis on transitioning to adulthood as a desirable "permanency arrangement."

The lessons learned from looking at young people transitioning from foster care will also be relevant to other children, youth and families especially those at risk and those affected by multiple public systems as well.

THE NATIONAL FOSTER CARE AWARENESS PROJECT

Improving the Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood

Policy Options

There has been a great deal of well-deserved attention recently to the challenges that young people face as they make the transition from foster care to adulthood. News articles and young people themselves point to the need for stronger systems of support for these most vulnerable citizens. We must now move toward improvement of programs and coordination of policies that will enhance the child welfare system's ability to help every youth in foster care become a self-sufficient, contributing member of his or her community.

Improving the transition of young people from foster care into healthy adulthood requires a clear, consistent goal that guides a child's experiences and becomes the primary theme for organizing service delivery. Throughout the foster care experience, a relationship must be established and sustained between each child and one or more caring, committed adults. Such relationships would support a developmental approach to meeting youth needs, and would create desperately needed stability in the life of the young person. The responsible adult or adults would facilitate connections for that young person both within and beyond the child welfare system.

These connections must be broader than currently defined so that decisions affecting young people involve not only service providers within the child welfare system but also the young people themselves, their foster families, legal guardians, service providers (such as teachers and employers), and other concerned community members. A wide array of connections must be established while a youth is still in foster care, and continue beyond the time of emancipation. This diverse web of supports will ensure that housing, healthcare, employment, education and other needs are met. We must ensure that young people have both the stable relationships with caring adults and broad, community-wide connections that will help them make the transition to adulthood in healthy and successful ways.

How do we strengthen our nation's ability to promote more successful outcomes for the 25,000 young people who must leave the foster care system each year? Federal and state policies play a critical role in determining what supports and opportunities are available to this group of youth. Child welfare, education and youth development policies must support the following program and service strategies: *promoting supports for youth, providing ongoing preparation for self-sufficiency, strengthening independent living services, promoting academic achievement, emphasizing career development, teaching money management, ensuring a safe and stable place to live and fostering meaningful attachments between youth in care and one or more caring adults.* The following outlines possible policy enhancements and reforms within current federal statutory authority that will support best practice for helping older youth in foster care.

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Promote supports for young people in care and after leaving care

Young people report that relationships with people who care about them and are there for them consistently make all the difference in the world when they are on their own. In addition to education and support in making decisions about permanency, children and youth in care must have opportunities to establish and maintain long-term supportive relationships with caring adults and that continue after emancipation. Opportunities to develop such relationships can be created through participation in mentoring, recreation, community service, and other youth development programs. These relationships can only develop and flourish, however, if children and youth in foster care have access to stable community placements and strong case advocacy.

Young adults need consistent, accessible support after they leave care that will enable them to overcome short-term instability in meeting housing, transportation, child care, employment and education needs. These youth should be able to return to a caring family, child welfare providers or youth development programs for assistance when they need it. An aftercare system would assist young adults in addressing short-term crises, as well as supporting them as they struggle to sustain long-term independence. While the lead agency may vary by community, formal aftercare systems would help connect young people to existing adult support systems and other available community resources.

Policy Ideas:

- Offer incentives for child welfare agencies to provide aftercare services to emancipated young adults
- Encourage coordination at the federal and state level with the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) for outreach to youth leaving the foster care system
- Explore existing programs within the Departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, and Education, and the Corporation for National Service as resources for enhanced support
- Provide policy guidance through creating incentives, performance measures and standards within the Independent Living Program
- Reward programmatic improvements from states such as: (1) identifying and training a group of caring, committed adults who will support young people as they prepare for this transition and beyond the age of emancipation as needed; (2) creating a resource person on staff in each child welfare agency responsible for broader connections; and (3) forming alumni groups among young adults leaving the foster care system
- Require measurement of outcomes and evaluation of services for those young people who do emancipate from the foster care system to adulthood
- Promote active youth participation in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of services, as well as in advocacy and system reform efforts

Promote Early and Ongoing Preparation for Independence

In addition to planning for permanency, preparing youth for self-sufficiency must begin early. Foster parents, legal guardians, family members, other involved adults (including birth family members) and youth themselves should participate actively in the planning process. Guiding principles and strategies to promote positive long-term development must be integrated into ongoing services from the time a child enters care, and must help forge connections to birth family and community of origin. Life (and social) skills, work skills and academic skills training should be implemented on a continuum of developmental readiness for children and youth of all ages. Maximizing educational continuity and achievement for young people in foster care is of paramount importance. It must go hand in hand with promoting placement stability for a child. Specifically, the child welfare system must connect children and youth to community services and supports that promote academic achievement and readiness for community participation and productive citizenship.

Policy Ideas:

- Integrate early assessment and provision of developmentally appropriate independent living skills into the case plans for all children and youth in care
- Examine current "best practices" around educational attainment for youth in foster care (i.e., programs and partnerships involving schools and child welfare agencies; role of special education and disabilities statutes)
- Promote stability and consistency for youth in educational settings through incentives for tutoring and other services that promote high academic achievement
- Encourage coordination among systems to ensure stability and consistency, i.e. coordination between schools and child welfare agencies (e.g., an education "passport" for youth)
- Examine best practice in school-to-career initiatives (i.e., programs and partnerships involving employers, post-secondary institutions, and high schools)
- Create incentives to improve educational stability for foster youth within the existing federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act
- Increase professional development opportunities for teachers, foster parents and other adults working with foster youth within current child welfare and education statutes

Strengthen Current Independent Living Services

Improve the quality and delivery of current independent living and other critical services that support successful transitions and promote more effective transition planning while young people

are in care. Ensure that resources are allocated fairly to states according to their youth population in foster care. Enhance professional development for case workers and all adult caretakers, especially foster parents, teachers and other significant adults in a youth's life to facilitate self-sufficiency skill development while in care and to sustain connections to community resources. Enhance planning for youth in group homes and residential facilities who may not have the support of a family structure during the transition to adulthood. Ensure access to high quality independent living services through promotion of standards for service planning and delivery.

Policy Ideas:

- Utilize existing tax incentives, waivers, interagency agreements or initiatives and other cost-neutral policy mechanisms to encourage effective use of existing resources and funding for independent living and other services
- Increase outreach for use of Medicaid for mental health and other health-related services
- Strengthen the requirements of Independent Living Programs to encourage the child welfare system to coordinate with other institutions' school-to-career and post-secondary education programs
- Strengthen the requirements of Independent Living Programs to meet minimum standards of case management, service coordination and planning, and service delivery
- Connect Americorps volunteers to independent living programs to provide mentoring, tutoring and other educational planning assistance

Promote academic achievement and emphasize career development

Children and youth in foster care often have lower educational outcomes than young people who are raised by their birth parents, and may experience more challenges to successful employment. Contributing factors include unstable school experiences caused by changes in home placements and the lack of focus on developing social skills, work skills and work experience to enable a young person to function effectively in a job. In order to improve these outcomes, the foster care system must promote high academic achievement and strong vocational preparation as goals that all youth in the foster care system can achieve. All young people have equal potential to be successful learners, and should receive the supports and opportunities needed to achieve educational goals. Professional development and coordination among institutions are critical. Extra support for participation in post-secondary education and vocational training should be available to each youth leaving care.

Policy Ideas:

- Identify opportunities for policy coordination across the child welfare system in relation to those federal statutes that address K-12 education, post-secondary education, adult and vocational education, disabilities, workforce, and other relevant opportunities for education and career advancement
- Consider a comprehensive approach linking existing federal programs to create a regulatory "G.I. Bill for Youth in Foster Care" that would include promotion of academic achievement, vocational training and career development
- Ensure that educational achievement, career development, and coordination of services and supports are consistently addressed through case management and planning policies

Increase Emphasis on Fiscal Management and Savings

Allow children and youth in the foster care system to accumulate savings without penalty so that when they leave care they have a capacity to secure basic necessities (e.g., rental deposit for housing, food, transportation and other services). Provide every child who enters the foster care system with a long-term financial plan. The plan needs to include information regarding state laws and financial literacy/training for child welfare providers, foster families, young people, and other adult caretakers. When a young adult leaves the foster care system, a plan for earning and managing money should already be in place.

Policy Ideas:

- Evaluate utility of TANF/individual development accounts for youth in foster care
- Ask the National Endowment for Financial Education to develop potential strategies
- Collect information state-by-state regarding current laws and regulations that affect asset accumulation
- Consider a comprehensive approach linking existing federal programs to create a regulatory "G.I. Bill for Youth in Foster Care" that would address financial needs
- Promote a focus on accumulation of assets in addition to generation of income

Improve Housing Opportunities for Youth Transitioning From Care

Assure that every young adult leaving the foster care system has a plan for immediate, short- and long-term housing. Increase access to emergency shelter, transitional housing and longer-term affordable housing. This housing could include foster families, group homes/residences,

transitional living arrangements, community-based placements, and visiting mentor homes (i.e., for young adults who need places to live while in college but not necessarily subject to restrictions of foster care placements)

Ensure that no young person is discharged to homelessness. This is crucial given the numbers of youth who end up in homeless shelters upon leaving the foster care system.

Policy Ideas:

- Promote public/private partnerships for development of affordable transitional housing (within current programs such as the Transitional Living Program) for young people leaving the foster care system
- Invite the Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac Foundations to create challenge grants in high-impact communities to increase supply of affordable housing
- Look at overlap with existing TANF funding regarding opportunities for housing for young welfare recipients
- Examine provisions of Section 8, Supportive Housing, the Family Self-sufficiency Program, the Family Unification Program, and Public Housing statutes to determine feasibility of targeting youth leaving foster care for housing services and support
- Explore potential of flexibility for states to draw down funds for housing through waiver authority

SHOW: NPR TALK OF THE NATION (NPR 2:00 pm ET)
JULY 29, 1998, WEDNESDAY
Trascript # 98072902-211

Uof Wisconsin

GUESTS: Mark Courtney; Valli Matthews
BYLINE: Ray Suarez, Washington, DC

HIGHLIGHT:
Though foster care is supposed to be a temporary arrangement many children bounce from home to home for years, until they've aged out of the system. For those turned out of foster care at 18, the transition from teen to adult is abrupt. With little or no guidance, they must now find jobs, feed and clothe themselves and take complete responsibility for their well- being. Join Ray Suarez and guests for a look at the plight of former foster care teens making it on their own as adults.

BODY:

RAY SUAREZ, HOST: This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Ray Suarez.

If you're a child in the United States who cannot live with your parents but are still legally tied to them through parental rights, you're in for a tough time. There's a desperate shortage of foster parents in the United States.

The placement of children becomes more and more difficult as they get older. And if your parents are judged unfit to raise you, yet parental rights remain, or if parental rights are taken away but no one steps forward to adopt you, you can make it all the way through to young adulthood -- what's often called aging out -- and find that at that point, nobody's going to take care of you. Not your parents. Not a foster parent. Not the state.

The machinery for helping children at the end of their eligibility for foster care is in many places shockingly inadequate. We got you this far, the system seems to say, good luck. The problem with this conversation comes from talking about situations as varied as foster homes, and making broad generalizations. I recognize that.

As some family agencies have learned the hard way, the shortage of foster parents has let some less-than-ideal foster care givers slip through the net. Some merely neglect the children, feeding them cheap food to see a profit from the state's stipend or emotionally starve these highly needy kids, while a tiny number actually abuse and hurt them.

At the same time, there are foster parents whose faces should be on postage stamps and on the cover of magazines. They're heroic, loving, generous people who accept the sometimes shattered cargo of a child nobody wants and provide care, nurture, and stability. While still other foster parents want nothing

more than to adopt the children in their care, but find the way blocked by courts, social workers, and parents who still hold out hope for family reunification.

So at the end of this process, on their 18th birthday, some foster children are ready to assume the responsibilities of adulthood, and some are, well, just a mess. And agency rules based on birthdays and

eligibility are not equipped to make a distinction between the two.

Foster care and aging out this hour on the program. Mark Courtney is an associate professor of social work at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and co-author of "Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood: Outcomes 12 to 18 Months After Leaving Out-of-Home Care," a report by the Institute of Research on Poverty. Welcome to TALK OF THE NATION.

MARK COURTNEY, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF SOCIAL WORK, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, MADISON, CO-AUTHOR, "FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD: OUTCOMES 12 TO 18 MONTHS AFTER LEAVING OUT-OF-HOME CARE": It's a pleasure, Ray.

SUAREZ: And Valli Matthews is here with me in Washington. She's the community education coordinator of For Love of Children here in DC. Good to have you with us.

VALLI MATTHEWS, COMMUNITY EDUCATION COORDINATOR, FOR LOVE OF CHILDREN: Good afternoon.

SUAREZ: Our number in Washington 800-989-8255. That's 800-989- TALK.

Mark Courtney, maybe you should give us some opening statistics which will give us an idea of what happens to these young people after they're cut loose.

COURTNEY: Well, my colleagues and I in Wisconsin, Irving Peliavin (ph) and myself, looked at youth aging out of care in Wisconsin. And we found a number of things. First of all, they're generally satisfied with the system, about three-quarters of them when you ask them questions like, you know, did foster parents have your interests at heart? They'll say, yes. They strongly agree or agree with that kind of statement. And about 75 percent of them felt that they were lucky to be in out-of-home care.

We asked whether they thought there was anything that would have allowed them to stay with their families, and 90 percent of them said no. So on the one hand, you get a clear picture that most of them feel very lucky to have been in foster care.

And I want to clarify that by foster care I'm referring to the entire system. And actually, a fair number of these youths spent some time in a group home or residential treatment center, although most of them were living in foster homes at the time they aged out.

They have high hopes and aspirations. About 70 percent of them expected to go on to college, generally thought they were going to do well. But when we interviewed them about 12 to 18 months after they had left the system, after they had been discharged from the system, we found that about half of them were sort of doing marginally well, and a significant proportion really had had some serious problems making that transition.

Only about half of them were employed when we interviewed them 12 to 18 months after discharge. That's actually slightly less than had been employed when we talked to them while they were in the foster care system. Even those who were employed were earning less on average than a full time minimum wage worker. Maybe that's not real surprising given their limited education. Thirty-seven percent of them hadn't finished either high school or obtained an equivalent degree, and fewer than 10 percent have gone on for any kind of college. When they needed medical care, about half of them reported that at some point they needed medical care. They couldn't get it. A number of them had been

using mental health services, counseling of various sorts. Not surprisingly, given their backgrounds, while they were in the system, about half. But when we interviewed them after they left the system, fewer than half that, about 21 percent, were able to obtain any services for mental health needs.

And then we sort of looked at some things that we thought would be indicators of whether the transition was working for them: employment or not, education or not. And we found that a lot of them had experienced outcomes that I think any parent would be really hard pressed to feel good about. And as sort of a parent of the system, a citizen, I sort of hang my head thinking about this.

Thirty-seven percent of these youth had had one of the following things happen to them. Either they had been seriously physically victimized -- beaten up, attacked with a weapon, sexually assaulted, raped, homeless, or incarcerated at least once in the 12 to 18 months after they left care. So for a significant proportion of them, at least one pretty horrendous event had taken place. It was an indication that the transition to self-sufficiency really wasn't working very well.

I guess one last thing is, it was interesting to us, is the role that both foster families and the families of origin of these youth played when they were making that transition. About a third of them were able to stay for some period of time in their foster home after the system discharged them.

So, there clearly are a lot of foster parents out there that try to help with that transition by even allowing the youth to stay there. At the same time, when we interviewed them the second time around, almost a third of these young adults were living with their families, living either with a parent or another relative.

And that's really striking, giving that the focus of independent living programs in general, the programs that try to prepare these youth to make it when they're young adults, is not on connecting them, reconnecting them or maintaining their connections with their family, trying to make the most out of those connections while minimizing any harm or stress that can come from those connections.

SUAREZ: Mark Courtney is with us from Madison, Wisconsin.

Valli Matthews, you know, when you think about being 18, it's tough enough to move toward independence if you've had a stable, coherent family life for much of the 18 years leading up to that day. But now, you're talking about people who have often had tumultuous lives until their 18th birthday. And now they've got to worry about rent and a gas bill, doing their own marketing and cooking and so on. It's a tremendous change.

MATTHEWS: Right. I think it's really important to think about your own family and when your own children grow up. Frequently, they are not prepared to leave at 18, at 21, at 28. Sometimes they even come back. And the system is considering foster children who always have some trauma connected to being in foster care, to going from home to home. Some children are sexually and physically abused. And then in addition, there are various breaks from foster families they may have connected to.

So when they leave the system, all those separations, sometimes they can't get back to foster families to get that support they need. And many of the -- in you're -- I'm now serving in the District area, it's split between children leaving foster care at 18 -- foster families. And many of them are living in group homes, and that's another situation where you're dealing with a counselor, an agency person, maybe very supportive. But it's still a transitional person.

So if at 21 you really need some assistance, many of the kids come back to the agency to get assistance and hope that same social worker is there. But it's not like being with a family when you can go back to a family and say, hey, I need a loan. I need someone to co-sign an apartment or a car. It's just really different and difficult.

SUAREZ: So the District does provide some -- it's not a cold turkey cut-off at 18, and even that you're finding isn't good enough?

MATTHEWS: Well unfortunately, they're changing the rules. They used to stop at 21, but the rules are being changed to have a cold cut-off at 18, unless the young person has special needs or they're in school, or they have, you know, they have -- they're trying to do something to become independent.

But the unfortunate thing, if young people are not doing those things at 18, those are the young people who go on to become homeless, because they haven't finished high school, they have no social skills. They can't move on into an independent world. So those are the young people least prepared to be released.

SUAREZ: We're talking about this at a time in America when governments are trying to preach the gospel of self-reliance, of giving people minimal necessary training that they need to be self- reliant and have them make their own way.

It would seem to be a case of bad timing to go, not only to the District of Columbia, but a county government in Minnesota or a state family services agency in New Mexico and say, you know, I'm not quite ready, but I don't need the full set of resources anymore. Maybe there's something in the middle you can give me. And it doesn't sound like it's a good time to ask for it.

MATTHEWS: Right. I was noticing the article that Mark wrote, which I thought really covered a lot of bases. There are some programs that really realize kids need more than just money, they actually need, you know, an entry-level employment position. They need job, housing, they need other pieces. And I think that's something different states could put together.

Locally, the only thing that the District is offering is a program called Keys of Life. This is a life skill preparation program, but every teen does not get that program. And many of the teenagers live in Maryland and Virginia, even though they're DC wards. So transportation to those programs are difficult. And my understanding is that the District is not spending their full allotment.

In many of the states, they contract with private agencies to support this effort. And for example, locally, that would be a good effort to ask some of the private agencies to help out with that.

SUAREZ: Mark Courtney, you mentioned that some of the young people you surveyed did stay in contact with their foster families. But I guess naturally, those families don't any longer get any support from the state for helping these kids?

COURTNEY: That's right. They -- in Wisconsin, I mean, and in general they don't. I mean, at 18 or in most states they do the same thing that Valli's saying. If a youth is going to finish high school, let's say, before their 19th birthday, then the foster parent can continue to receive a foster care reimbursement until that point in time. But that's really the extent of it. After that, the foster parents are expected, if they're going to provide any support, to do that on their own.

And some of them do that. As Valli said, some of these youth are living in group care situations at the time they age out. That's actually what brought me to interest in this. I worked in group care in California, and I really had a hard time with the fact that we had to just let them go. They'd be living there with us, and then the next day we wouldn't be reimbursed to care for them anymore, and we simply couldn't keep them.

So it really is a radical cut-off, and as Valli says, there are some states that actually don't even use their entitled allotment -- or their entire allotment of federal funding to try to provide support to these youth?

SUAREZ: Well, I'm wondering whether you could make a case for this being a smart way to spend money, to continue spending it on the 18-year-olds, given the fact that some of them get in trouble with the law, some of them are less than optimally employable, some of them have children out of wedlock after their placements. That they come back to the system one way or another in more expensive ways, if we don't spend the money up front.

COURTNEY: Well, yeah, I can give you a few examples. The comparison I like to make is when we interviewed them the first time, none of them were homeless. And 14 percent of the males in our sample were homeless at least once. Twenty-seven percent of these males had been incarcerated at least once. Incarceration's a very expensive thing for society to be doing. None of them were incarcerated the first time we interviewed them. And I could go on down the list.

And I think, from my perspective, as a prevention intervention, this is a very "high-risk group." And I think it's a very sound investment, given the homes that they've come from, what we know about the challenges are when they reach the age of 18, to go and provide some more transitional support for this population.

Not all of them are going to need it, and the ones that don't need it will go on and do just fine. But for those who really do need it need significant help -- and in our study, it looks like about one-third, I think it would be a very wise investment.

SUAREZ: Valli Matthews.

MATTHEWS: I just wanted to mention, for example, we have a program for teenage mothers, and some of our mothers are as young as 13 and have two or three children. This is a very high risk group also for, one, child abuse and neglect, but also to be homeless, if they're released from care without any skills.

So in our agency, for example, we have a continuing program. They can live in foster homes, group homes or independent living. And it's a continual process of helping them to become independent and to become, you know, appropriate parents for their children as well.

SUAREZ: If you're just joining us, we're talking about foster care and what happens to the young people who age out of the system this hour on TALK OF THE NATION.

Valli Matthews is here with me in Washington, community education coordinator of a program called For Love Of Children here in Washington. And Mark Courtney is an associate professor of social work at the University of Wisconsin at Madison who's been looking into this particular population. He joins us from Madison, Wisconsin.

Our number's 800-989-8255. And our first stop this hour is San Jose, California. Hi, Wanda.

CALLER: Hi. I was thinking about volunteering for this program I heard about in California for mentoring kids coming out of the foster care program, and I was wondering if any of your people knew anything about those, and whether they were successful or not.

MATTHEWS: Well, I think mentoring in general is very successful, and I think it's great, Wanda, that you're going to volunteer because many of the young people need role models. And particularly, we try to encourage young people who have been in foster care to come back and reach back to some of those young people to say, you know, I'm successful, I can do it.

CALLER: Yeah, I was in foster care 20 something years ago, and did it on my own. But -- so that's part of why I want to volunteer is because I've been there, done that.

SUAREZ: Oh, so you were a person who aged out?

CALLER: Yes, I was.

SUAREZ: Well, talk about what kind of help, if any, you got back then.

CALLER: Well, I was lucky because I had a scholarship to college. And so, I did go to college. And my family that I was with -- the final family I was with was very supportive, and I'm still in touch with them today. I'm 41 years old. So, that's a long time.

And so, I was very lucky. But I still had problems. I still faced the shock of -- that's what medical care costs. Oh, my goodness, when I go to a dentist, I do get a bill, and doing a checking book -- checking account, and, you know, thank God I had their support. I could call and talk to them about how to do this, because I didn't have anybody else in the world.

MATTHEWS: Did the state offer any classes or life skill programs?

CALLER: No, I think it was $125 was that -- that was it. You were given enough to set you up in a room basically. And I think at that time -- this was 1976, I think it was like $125. And that was it, you know, here's $125, goodbye, have a nice life.

SUAREZ: Wow.

COURTNEY: That's not surprising. That's actually why the federal government created the program. They did it 10 years after you left care, Wanda, so that's not surprising. And being a mentor for exactly the reasons you pointed out, I think, is really important.

We find that the youth who got concrete assistance, had somebody there to help them when they had to go and find a house, to help them when they had to find medical care, that's -- they seemed to be doing better. The ones who just got training classes that are offered typically by the system, that training really didn't appear to have much of an effect on how they did afterwards.

CALLER: Well, are these programs successful? Or, is it too early to have any numbers on that, or what?

COURTNEY: Well, one of the real shames is that this program now in state and federal money has

probably spent a billion dollars, and we don't have any decent data evaluating these programs. To Wisconsin's credit, they -- actually, the money that funded our study was independent living money, federal and state money.

But that's the only state that I'm aware of that's really even gone to the effort to track kids the way we're doing here in Wisconsin. So if you talk to people who run mentoring programs, they're very positive about them. And based on what we see, it seems to make a difference in who does well and who doesn't. I would say that they're a promising program, but they haven't been really evaluated.

CALLER: OK, thank you very much.

SUAREZ: Wanda, thanks for your call. Wanda, joining us from San Jose, California. Mike's with us now from Bemidji, Minnesota.

CALLER: Yeah, hello.

SUAREZ: Hi, Mike.

CALLER: Well, I have a question. I was in the system, too, you know, back in the early 1970s. And my father had a mental illness. So he was like on Social Security.

And when they dumped me out into the street without any training or any place to live or anything, then the government also refused my real -- my genetic father's Social Security benefits which should have taken care of us until we were like 21, had we gone on to college. So, you know, that definitely created a tremendous hardship as you were ill prepared to face the real world, you know. So is there any programs out there to help these kids today, and what about with the Social Security part of it?

SUAREZ: For parents who are still living and on those forms of benefit? Can they tap into -- can people in the situation Mike was in tap into parental benefits?

MATTHEWS: Yes, they can. As long as, you know, they're identified as your birth family. Maybe one of the problems was to prove who your birth father was. I don't know if that was a concern.

CALLER: No. Everybody knew who he was.

MATTHEWS: OK.

CALLER: When I made inquiries, of course, being 18, I probably didn't make all the inquiries. And then the other thing, too, in the State of Washington, there was a notification, you know, after -- it was during the time the kids turned 18 and they became adults and they got the right to vote. And the state at that time used that as a cut- off point to save some money on a budget.

Well later on, they gave these children that they threw out in the street some money, you know. I don't know how much it was, but they never contacted me personally. And they probably -- what they did is they put an ad in some obscure paper, and, of course, 18-year- olds probably don't read the paper very often -- the back page or something.

And so, there was a lot of monies that probably not collected that should have been collected by these youth that were out there in the streets.

SUAREZ: Well, Mike, how did things go for you?

CALLER: Well, I went on to college. But statistically, it's a pretty abysmal deal. Probably 90 percent of your foster kids who get out there that go to school fail in college and don't graduate. I think there's a failure rate of like 90 percent the first two years.

Myself, I didn't finish, but I did go to five years of college. I had to work, you know, a couple -- three jobs. And as far as total life skills, you're out there in the street all the time. And you're -- even as an adult, you're in fear always because there's no net to catch you should you fail. And there's -- you know, when you want to buy a house, there's no one to co-sign so you get -- you know, it's a much more difficult situation than the, say, average

American, regardless of race, would have. And then if you put factors of race in it, I can't imagine, you know, very difficult for them.

SUAREZ: Mike joining us from Bemidji, Minnesota. You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

Let's go next to Janice. She's calling us from Minneapolis. Janice, welcome.

CALLER: Thanks for taking my call. I'm really pleased that you're having this conversation. I just wanted to share an observation. I've worked in the past in residential treatment for women, and they had their children there with them.

The women at their -- one of the biggest issues was that -- was abandonment. They had been basically raised as wards of the state or in foster care, and I've had an opportunity to follow their children who now have children. And who-- the children of these women, they're struggling as parents.

And so I see it kind of a generational thing, and cycle -- there's some -- definitely some cycles to be broken. And I'm just really pleased that this is on the table today.

SUAREZ: Well Mark Courtney, do we know about kids who come out of foster care, that they are more or less likely, or about the same likely as any other Americans to have children who end up in foster care themselves?

COURTNEY: Unfortunately, I'd say that we don't. There are a couple of studies out there that -- our study and another one in the Midwest, I think, have some chance of demonstrating that. But there really hasn't been very much good research that was able to follow these folks.

Typically, folks that have tried to follow them -- researchers that have tried to follow them have lost half of them. And I think that's an indication of how unstable the lives of many of these people are. And so, I can't say one way or the other really that they're more likely to enter foster care. I wouldn't be surprised.

I'm really glad that the last two callers raised that issue, because the thing that our young adults felt least comfortable about was parenting. We asked them how prepared you feel at a number of things -- find a home, get a job, get medical insurance, et cetera. Parenting was the thing that they felt least prepared for.

And I think, given their backgrounds, that's really telling. Kids I worked with, really were worried about

that. They wanted to be good parents, but they were worried about it.

MATTHEWS: Right. I think another thing that's really important if we can reconnect young people to their birth families, they feel some support. I think you kind of alluded to some of the young people actually live with their birth families. But just to know, even if the birth family can't help out financially, emotionally it's a kind of a safety net. But I think it also stops kids -- children from having -- foster children from having -- when they have their own children, they're very concerned about their children not going into care.

So they try extremely hard to be really good parents, to be really careful about what messages, they're sending because maybe in foster care they got a lot of negative messages. So I think their parenting skills, even though they might feel inadequate, they're really being super parents because they don't their kids to be in care.

SUAREZ: For those people you've met, Valli, who've come through a lot of separate homes or moved around a lot, is there a lack of willingness to trust, a difficulty in making friendships and tight bonds, because they've had to be broken so many times in the past?

MATTHEWS: I think it is difficult. A lot of children experience that, have difficulty connecting to other people. And they have a tendency to come back to people they know and they trust from the past. And that's an OK thing. But also, they don't -- they can't make that leap to make new friendships and meet new people. There's always that fear, mistrust of, you know, why are they doing this, what's their real motive, are they trying to get something out of me. So that's lacking -- the trust piece.

Unless they've connected with a foster family that they can go back and say, you know, Mom and Dad, I need some help now, what can you do to help me out with?

SUAREZ: You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News. I'm Ray Suarez.

My guests are Mark Courtney and Valli Matthews. We're going to take a short break right now. When we return, we'll talk to a former foster care client about her life after she aged out of the system, and we'll take more of your calls at 800-909-8255.
You can e-mail us at totn@npr.org or send us a card or letter to:
TALK OF THE NATION Letters 635 Massachusetts Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20001

At 33 minutes past the hour, it's TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.
Welcome back to the program. I'm Ray Suarez.

Today, we're talking about the plight of foster care kids after they've aged out of the system. We're joined now by Lisa Foster (ph), a former foster care client from age 18 months until 18 years. Welcome to TALK OF THE NATION.

LISA FOSTER, FORMER FOSTER CARE CLIENT: Hi, thank you for having me.

SUAREZ: Well, tell us about your life after your 18th birthday. Were you given much preparation for being on your own?

FOSTER: No, not really. I guess at about -- well it started for me at about 16, because I stared to get very defenseful (ph) toward -- you know, I had so many moves. I had 11 moves in foster care altogether, so

when I got about 16, I started to really get like oh my God and worry about where I was going to go after I graduated from high school.

So, I somewhat sort of put myself into this independent living program. And, you know, got some help from some people, you know, in that organization, and they offered college opportunities to me, and I decided to go there but I was so on the defensive about being dropped when I turned 18 that I, you know, dropped out of college because I didn't know -- OK, I'm gonna to do one more year and they're gonna drop me totally, so I was even afraid to even get up there to graduate. And I ended up going into the Navy and I did the Navy for three years and I've been pretty much, you know, in good standings ever since.

I got married pretty early. But like you guys brought up the issue about having kids, you know, all while I was in foster care, I didn't want any kids I -- you know, as a matter of fact, from like third grade on, I was like I am not having any kids, I do not want them to go through what I'm going through, I do not want them -- and, you know, like the system is your family, so you have to, you know, -- you have to turn to them for everything. But then you think, well what am I gonna do when I have aged out of the system? I don't have any family left so, I had to find some -- find my own family, you know.

SUAREZ: Well, it's interesting that you chose the Navy because at first blush that would seem like a very big, very supportive, and very structured family. I mean, they know what your life is like morning noon and night, and you wear the clothes that they tell you and all that.

FOSTER: Yeah, that too. And I that -- I have to admit that did get on my nerves because...
LAUGHTER
... that was somewhat sort of like being in the system too, you know. I didn't want to -- I wanted to do it because -- see it's like when you're in foster care, you have to ask permission to go to the next state sometimes, so when I -- I had never been out of -- really out of the state, so I wanted to go to different countries, different parts of the world, so I really went there so that I could travel, and as soon as I did that, I got out, you know, to get out of that little systematic thing.

SUAREZ: Right, but it accomplished what you needed for?

FOSTER: Yeah, it served the purpose, it served the purpose, you know. And when I got out of that, I just felt -- and like I still feel now, I totally -- I want total independence. I don't want to have to depend on anybody, no job or anything, and that's why I am taking the total entrepreneur approach to life, period.

SUAREZ: Well, you talked about how, in your late teens, how difficult for you to relax about where you were going to be because your situation was so unsettled...

FOSTER: Right.

SUAREZ: ... is that something that hampered you later on, in your married life, in your young adult life?

FOSTER: Most definitely. Yeah, it's still, you know -- like I said before, when you're in foster care and you're switched from home to home, like I said I went to 11, it is so hard to even sleep in a new bed in a different bed. You know, I had so many nightmares and everything.

So when I got married I don't -- my poor husband, I sent him through some things because it was like I just wanted to stay in one place and just, you know -- and then with the military, you move anyway, but

you know, my husband was with me there, you know, and -- through thick and thin, but it was like OK we're here and we're gonna stay here, but when it was time to move back to -- from California where I was stationed, back to DC, I got really nervous because I didn't know what was gonna happen -- was gonna happen, you know. I have never been -- I've never had that -- I had never had that -- the plan or the goal already set, you know.

SUAREZ: So, looking back on it what could have helped you in your particular situation that you didn't get just before you turned 18?

FOSTER: What could have helped me? Well, the one thing that did help me was college, but I guess a little more support, a little better pre-emancipation program, you know, something that would -- that I could fall back on something -- I don't know, something I guess financially. I had nothing really, you know. I had no family to fall back on. I guess the family support, a support system, people that I could call, people that I could say well, what do I do next? Things that you would normally get from a family and, you know, that you'd ask your mother, what should I do now, you know? And that wasn't there for me.

SUAREZ: Well Lisa Foster, it sounds like things have turned out rather well for you though, in spite of everything. Good to talk to you.

FOSTER: Thank you very much...

SUAREZ: Lisa Foster is a former foster care client, she spoke to us by phone from Maryland.

My guests for the remainder of the hour are Mark Courtney, associate professor of social work at the University of Wisconsin and co-author of the recent report Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood: Outcomes 12 to 18 Months After Leaving Out of Home Care. And Valli Matthews, community education coordinator for the program For Love of Children.

If you want to join us, our number in Washington is 800-989-8255. And Valli Matthews, for all the unsettled part of her life before leaving care, it sounds like Lisa, you know kept her eye on the ball and didn't make some of the mistakes that you've talked about earlier.

MATTHEWS: Yes. I personally know Lisa and I know some of the struggles that she's had throughout the years, and I think she still is struggling with different issues. And she actually comes back and works with -- kind of a mentoring program to help other young people.

And I think as she said, one of the things that really helps is to have a family. And even if you can't have the family you lived with, even if families would say, you know, I'm willing to help young people aging out of foster care, I didn't raise them, but I'm willing to be resources, so when they need a meal, when they need some help, there's some adult that's there, either adult or couple, that are interested in supporting these young people.

SUAREZ: Let's go to Shaker Heights, Ohio. Karen, welcome to the program.

CALLER: Hi, I wanted to just make a few points that I think your guests probably already have. But, you know, part of independent living, I think, what teenager wouldn't like independent living? That's a great idea, get your own apartment, get your own finances. And I think that we haven't done the kids in the system any favor by doing that. I think it's been an excuse for the child welfare system to back out on

some of these kids. And quite frankly, you know, I needed my mom after I was 18, and my parents, and I still do.

The other thing that I want to talk about are some of the trends in child welfare, the circles of support in permanency for teens, reconnecting them to the parents, to their birth parents, and to those who really care about them, because your guests are absolutely right, that these kids leave and the folks they come back to are the folks that they know. So, maybe their parents couldn't care for them when they were young, but their parents could care for them now. That's what I wanted to say.

SUAREZ: Mark Courtney.

COURTNEY: She's absolutely right. In some ways, I think some of the things that are really missing, and this is -- we need to do more looking at this, but transitional living, we focus too much on what we call independent living services, that we're going to somehow train people that when they're 18, boom, you're on your own, and now you're prepared and you can do everything on your own. And I think all the callers have really pointed to the fact that that's just not the way most people make that transition.

And really, having places for people to fall back on in terms of support, from people who are supportive, who know what it's like, and also in terms of housing, job assistance, et cetera, is essential. And the other thing is this reconnection.

All of child welfare practice, and I get the sense that the last caller was a child welfare worker somewhere, once kids are in long-term foster care, we tend to forget they have families. And the fact is they have families, and most of our youth have had active contact with their families fairly frequently since they've left the system, and that's not always positive, but I think that we need to pay attention to that and hopefully make that as helpful to them as possible.

SUAREZ: And that -- there you need support from the state to the degree that there almost has to be a referee sort of watching the encounter, because a lot of the children who come into the system come in wounded and damaged by the very people that we're referring to as their families. And it's not such an uncomplicated thing to continue to have contact with them. In some cases, it's wonderful; in some cases, their parents are dealing with the complications that forced them to put their children into foster care in the first place. In other cases it's not, but there has to be a third party, doesn't there, to sort of say...

COURTNEY: Absolutely.

SUAREZ: ... you know, this kid probably shouldn't know his mother and father.

MATTHEW: Well, I'm a trainer and I actually train foster and adoptive parents who prepare to take young people. And I think it's really critical that all children know their families, whether they've been adopted, whether they've been separated. And the reason I encourage that is because we've had people in their 50s and 60s that say I still don't know who my dad is, and it's still bothering me.

And even if they reconnect to families that are not totally in order, that really can't help them, it still helps them with their own identity, and helps them to feel like they're a part. They have a heritage and they have a connection.

So, I think there is some importance in that, sometimes you do need a third party, because as you're saying, Ray, some of these reconnections are not pleasant, but people do have a right to know, and young

people have a right to know.

COURTNEY: I couldn't agree with Valli more.

SUAREZ: Well, but I did a program out of KCTS in Seattle last year called "Take This Heart," where we talked with people, both foster parents and foster children, and one kid in particular just had a horrendous background. And the foster parent in this case had to look to the state for some help, and some backup in making sure this child did not have continued regular contact.

In another case, with another set of boys, one parent said that when the boys would come home after spending a period of time with their mother, they were bouncing off the walls and incorrigible for days, because it was such an upsetting, grueling experience for them to spend a weekend with their mother, from whose house they had to be removed when they were kindergarten-first grade age.

I understand your endorsement of it in general principle, but boy, there are some cases where these poor kids are just being put through the wringer by this experience.

MATTHEW: Well, part -- the way the system used to work, and they're trying to change that, is birth family visits were not encouraged, so children were separated from parents, even parents that maybe did not abuse them, but maybe they were just neglectful. So there's not a lot feeling -- emotional feeling about them seeing those parents. The system would set it up so they didn't see the parents, and the connections were damaged between the child and the parent.

So, then you have a parent who hasn't seen their parent in over a year, they're attached to a new foster family, and now we're trying to reconnect them to birth families. So, what we're trying to do in the system now as children come into care, we're trying to keep them in their own neighborhood, we're trying to find foster homes to keep them connect to their birth families.

Those children who are in danger of risky situations, are always supervised by an agency staff person, they would not be allowed to spend a weekend in a birth family where they're at risk, so that wouldn't happen.

SUAREZ: Go ahead, Mark.

COURTNEY: The other thing is even if they -- you know some of -- by the time that they're older teenagers, in my experience in what we find in interviewing these youths, is that most of them know on some level when their parents are really a problem for them. That doesn't always mean -- in some cases, they decide they don't want to have contact with family, but by and large they do, as Valli says.

And the system doesn't necessarily facilitate making that a helpful thing for them. In some cases, it maybe helpful to just work with them and as you say have a third party to help them sort out their feelings, so that when they are on their own and they still are going to deal with their family, they're able to deal that -- do that in a manner that's not harmful to them.

In other cases family, and I think we want to look at that broadly, they have aunts and uncles and siblings, these are real sources of support for them. And when the system doesn't attend to those sources of support, it overlooks, you know, a major factor that plays a role in how they do after they leave.

It's not to say that there aren't cases where you want to be really careful about that, I agree with you, but

Valli mentioned the fact that a lot of these kids come in because of neglect. Most kids coming into the child welfare system these days are placed because of neglect, not because they've been physically or sexually abused by the parents.

SUAREZ: St. Louis, Missouri is next. Gloria, welcome.

CALLER: Oh, thank you so much for your show, Ray, thank you for taking my call.

I was a foster child from 1952 to 1967, as an emancipated minor I had to get out of that house, that foster care system in -- the system failed totally, the foster parents should have been given Oscars for their performances, you know, the social workers, I don't know -- I don't know what was wrong with them.

I'm just an advocate for really close monitoring of the foster care family, because these people, a lot of times, they're not about anything but the little bit of money. And little bit that it might be, it's enough to pay the utility bills, or it's enough to get their hair done or do whatever they want to do with it. You know, and the children are just -- I mean -- for so long, I was just a mess. If it hadn't been for the Job Corp, and I was thinking about the military, but I had no choice back then. 1968 here in St. Louis, no one prepared me for anything, but I was just tired of being treated like, I don't know, less than human in that family.

There was physical abuse, there was sexual abuse, there were just so many things going on. I was hopeless; I was helpless. That's just the way I felt. And I just feel that, you know -- I don't know how much worse orphanages could have been compared to some of these places. Physical -- our physical surroundings were better than our real mother could provide for us, but I don't know that it was necessarily better, you know, emotionally for us. And especially, the physical and sexual abuse that went on.

I just -- I don't know, I think it's awful. I'm an advocate for something other than what I went through. And consequently to this day I have no children. When I did contact my real mother, this woman was totally undesirable, she had started a new family and she was repeating the cycle. She had about five children in foster care already and she had six children additional.

SUAREZ: You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION, from NPR News.

Now, Gloria's call points out some of the shortcomings that she found in individual foster parents. How does this relate to the over all shortage of foster parents? There aren't nearly enough foster parents to handle the number of children that there are in need of care, in need of placement, but you'll hear stories like Gloria's told by children coming out of care today, not in 1968 pointing, to shortcomings.

Do we take on people that, if we had a sufficient supply, we would say well, thanks for their offer but no thanks, just because of the shortage?

MATTHEW: Well, I'd like to say, you know, we're recruiting foster parents all the time. It is much more difficult. We're asking to take children that have many more severe problems than they had before. And the motivations for people wanting to foster and adopt range from very appropriate reasons, to very inappropriate reasons. For example, if say they're infertile, that can be appropriate, if you've resolved that you're infertile, and you're not trying to take a foster child to replace the child you can't have. So, children -- foster children very often don't see, why do I have to be in a foster home when I'm abused and neglected I could have just stayed at my birth family?

But, screening people to have -- to know whether or not they're potentially gonna abuse and neglect children is extremely difficult. And one of the things many states have started is the preservice training. It's at least 30 hours of training, and there's several different programs around the country, but the idea is that trainers see them in this process and they also do the home studies, so they have a better in-depth feeling of how -- what are the -- what's the family's motivations? What's their style of parenting? What's their style of discipline -- because as you know they're not supposed to use corporal punishment, that's a big issue for many foster parents, because most people in America use corporal punishment, but we're telling them we're gonna give you a really difficult child and you can't use corporal punishment. So, those are some of the issues in screening parents we try to look for.

SUAREZ: Mark Courtney, how do we address this shortage which seems to be the nexus for a lot of other problems?

COURTNEY: Well, I think that we have to recognize that -- what Valli's saying that these are really challenging -- a lot of them are really challenging children to care for.

I believe that we need to sort of recognize that for many of these folks, we need to professionalize foster care. We need to treat these people, the foster parents, as members of a treatment team. And we need to really provide a lot of support to them that quite often public child welfare agencies simply aren't able to provide, they don't have the resources to do that.

You see some what are called treatment or therapeutic foster care agencies, that are beginning to do those kinds of things, and they retain foster parents. They're able to recruit and retain foster parents, but it costs more money to do that, you have to pay the foster parents somewhat more money, and you have to provide them a lot more support.

I do want to say that in our study, and in a lot of studies, you don't find a lot of abuse of children in foster care. And we ask these folks, you know, where you maltreated? We ask very specific questions, very small percentage -- I think it was about 3 percent, experienced anything that you would call child maltreatment. And as I said, the vast majority were generally satisfied with the system, looking at how they fare afterwards you can question whether they were naive in their satisfaction, but, you know, the overwhelming majority really feel that they were lucky to be in care and generally have good things to say about their experience and care.

SUAREZ: Gloria in St. Louis, thanks for talking to us and telling us your story, and good luck. Gloria joining us from St. Louis. That's all the time we have for today thanks to everyone who called, and thanks to my guests. Valli Matthews, good to talk to you.

MATTHEWS: Thank you very much.

SUAREZ: Valli Matthews is the community education coordinator at For Love of Children, she joined us here in studio 3A. Mark Courtney, good to talk to you.

COURTNEY: Thank you.

SUAREZ: Mark Courtney is associate professor of social work at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and co-author of the report Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood: Outcomes 12 to 18 Months After Leaving Out of Home Care. He joined us from member station WHA in Madison, Wisconsin.

Earlier, we heard from former foster care client Lisa Foster, she spoke to us by phone from Maryland.

Tune into TALK OF THE NATION at this time tomorrow for a look at the crisis in Sudan, a long-running civil war coupled with a drought has led to mass starvation in Africa's largest nation.

In Washington, I'm Ray Suarez, NPR News.

The Providence Journal-Bulletin
June 29, 1998, Monday, ALL EDITIONS

HEADLINE: **Fostering support for kids**
BYLINE: JOHN MARTIN; Journal-Bulletin TV Writer

The Rhode Island School of Design Museum is not a typical place to interview a Hollywood star.

But Victoria Rowell is by no means typical.

The actress, who plays Drucilla Barber Winters on CBS's The Young and the Restless and Dr. Amanda Bentley on the network's Diagnosis Murder, had called 30 minutes earlier wondering if the newspaper was interested in an interview.

It was an easy sell: She explained that rather than talking about television and the movies, she preferred to discuss having grown up as a foster child and what she has been doing in the past eight years to promote better lives for children placed in foster care.

Rowell was on her way to work on Federal Hill, where she is starring in Michael and Vincent Pagano's feature film A Wake in Providence. She wanted to see the RISD collection on the way and, it was agreed, that might be a good place to meet.

Sitting on a small bench in an anteroom outside one of the museum's large galleries, Rowell is politely but firmly evasive if you try to start at the beginning: to ask how it came to be that she ended up in a foster home. She is a Portland, Maine, native, she says, one of six children. She and her two sisters had the good fortune of being placed in the care of a Maine couple, Agatha and Robert Armstead.

What happened to Rowell is the exception, not the rule of foster care. At the age of 8, she was granted permission to live with another family in Cambridge, Mass., where she began studying ballet. She later was reunited with the Armsteads when they moved to Roxbury.

At 16, she received a scholarship to the School of American Ballet and became a member of the American Ballet Theatre's junior company. She later became a model and actress, landing a recurring role on The Cosby Show and guest-starring in other series. Since then, she has appeared in several movies, including Leonard Part VI, The Distinguished Gentleman, Dumb & Dumber and Eve's Bayou.

"I do have the Eliza Doolittle scenario, in that I was placed with parents enriched with love and morals and academics," she said in a soft voice that echoed off the museum walls. "It was an amazing thing. I had no idea I was a minority in terms of foster children. Because of that, I've been inspired to promote better care for foster children."

In 1990, Rowell founded the Victoria Rowell Foster Children's Positive Plan, which provides scholarships and pays for other expenses for foster children studying ballet and other performing arts, or participating in sports.

She stops to point out that the organization isn't in the business of scouting out top talent. "We don't expect our children to become the next Baryshnikovs or Margo Fonteyns or Judith Jamisons.

"But we know that people walk away with a great sense of discipline as a result. And being a foster

child, you really do need an extraordinary amount of discipline in your life, because it is so easy to go the other way and be depressed and self-pitying."

An overtaxed system

Rowell also lobbies on behalf of better foster care. It is a system that, she says, is, at best, inconsistent.

"It works some of the time, but there is a lot of disparaging news," she said, citing as an example the practice of dumping foster children into group homes.

"Juvenile sexual offenders are being placed with sexually offended children," she said. "That's a recipe for mayhem, and we have repetitive behavior.

"The system doesn't work a lot of the time, because we are overtaxed. The genesis of foster care at the turn of the century was an interim service. It has now become a type of adoption agency. It has left children in what I call a nebulous labyrinth of care.

"We have 500,000 American children in foster care. In Los Angeles, we have 170,000 children in foster care - mainly due to drugs, cocaine specifically. We have social workers with 100 cases, which is impossible."

Prepare them for life

Even in situations where foster care works, children face legal emancipation at 18, leaving many without financial support or medical insurance. Rowell and others are asking states to delay emancipation to age 23, providing foster children stay in school, or are studying a trade or the arts.

"They are literally dumped out of the system - there's no polite way of saying it," she said. "I was studying very hard and got into one of the most prestigious ballet schools in the world. And yet, when I needed help at 18 to pay my room and board - I was already on scholarship - it just couldn't be done. And the medical end was equally disparaging."

Most foster children at 18 are still finding their way, she said. "That's why I emphasize to foster parents that if they see an inkling of interest in something, push the foster child in that direction."

Dance, she says, prepares one for life. Among friends she studied with as a child in Cambridge, Mass., are a high-risk obstetrician at Massachusetts General Hospital, an executive with Gillette in Paris and a teacher.

"They all shared the discipline of dance, and it's carried through to all things they have done," Rowell said. "So, I'm hoping that skill - that tool - can be given to foster children."

The Capital (Annapolis, MD.)
December 15, 1996, Sunday

HEADLINE: **What happens when foster care ends?**
BYLINE: By MARY GRACE GALLAGHER Staff Writer

Raised in a series of group foster homes, it has been many years since 21-yearold Rich Christianson had a place to call home for the holidays.

For that matter, he has no place to call home at all now that he has been liberated from the system that fed and housed him for eight years, then showed him the door.

In as much as he lacks parents and a place to live, Rich is utterly on his own. With no car, no insurance, no skills, his prospects are bleak.

But, by virtue of the fact that there are many young people in similar straights, he is not alone.

Rich's story is one of a life lived in foster care limbo _ a place where unadopted children exist until they can be emancipated.

In at least one sense he is lucky. Maryland is one of only six states in the nation to continue to support fosterlings after age 18.

But child advocate Trish Frederick says Rich's path from one temporary placement to another is a dismal reminder of the community's failure to reach out and embrace needy children.

"There is a segment of this society that has been deemed throw-away," said Mrs. Frederick, who with her husband, Rod, provides temporary shelter for 30 to 40 county foster children each year. She would like to see more churches support foster families.

"Maybe then more people would sign up and give these kids the long-term stability they crave," she said.

Rich, who first stayed with the Fredericks and their three children for a month when he was 14, moved back into the basement bedroom of their Cape St. Claire home last month after a series of calamities left him homeless.

"You can't understand, but he has nothing. No parents to fall back on. No money and no possessions," Mrs. Frederick said. "He may be 21, but he's still a child with a child's dreams. He never had a childhood. That's what's so sad."

A life alone

Unfortunately, Rich is not the only young man to exit the foster care system to such dismal prospects.

There currently are 50 young people, ages 15 to 21, enrolled in the county's Independent Living Project. Administered by the Department of Social Services in conjunction with foster care, the ILP targets those

children in foster care who are unlikely to be reunited with family or adopted by anyone else due to their age or special emotional or physical needs.

The program, which is federally mandated and funded for the 16- to 18-yearold age group and statefunded thereafter, attempts to prepare foster children for emancipation by teaching them about personal finance, hygiene, apartment living, job and car maintenance.

Another objective of the ILP, according to coordinator Patrick Patrong, is to help children develop support systems in the community.

"Caseworkers do try to locate family or group support systems for these children, but it's sad to say that sometimes they are unsuccessful," he said.

Mr. Patrong said ILP graduates are encouraged to donate their time to organizations like churches or political groups.

"The more you contribute to a community, the more likely you are to be embraced by it," he said.

When all else fails, "there's always adult services," Mr. Patrong said, indicating that someone like Mr. Christianson, with no resources, would qualify for government assistance.

But the last thing Mr. Christianson wants is to be back under DSS' wing.

There, he was jostled between group homes and new caseworkers almost on a yearly basis.

"I always thought a better situation would come along," he said, considering the six different places he stayed during his eight years with DSS.

He was neglected by his own mother, who he says never made an effort to contact him during that time. His brief stay at the Fredericks' busy house gave him a taste of family life he has yearned for ever since.

But because it was a temporary shelter, he was only permitted to stay there 30 days.

When he was 17, Mr. Christianson insisted upon leaving foster care. Within two weeks, the teen-ager took his first nosedive into homelessness.

"It was a bitter cold winter night and my husband got a call from Rich," Mrs.Frederick recalled of Rich's first foray into independence. She allowed him to spend the night and the next day convinced Rich and foster care authorities that he should go back into the system.

"Here is a child I hadn't seen in three years calling me for a place to stay because he has nowhere else to turn," she said. "Why can't there be a few more doors out there open to these kids? Why didn't he have anywhere else to turn?"

When he turned 18, DSS allowed Mr. Christianson to move out of the group home he had been staying in. Still receiving a $ 450-a-month subsidy, Rich moved in with his girlfriend and her father to save money. A year later, his daughter, Felicia, now 1, was born.

Rich doesn't wallow in regret or berate himself. He just worries, night and day.

"I don't want (Felicia) to grow up like I did," said Rich, who visits his daughter weekly. He does not pay child support, but says he is trying to.

Pragmatic choices

Shy and solemn, with a mind for math and an Annapolis High School diploma, Mr. Christianson recently tested high on the the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery Test and in January plans to join the Army.

It's a pragmatic choice _ one made by 25 of the 372 Maryland youth who left the ILP in 1994.

But it's not exactly what Rich had in mind.

"I thought I'd be in college studying engineering," said Rich, who spends free time working on the Fredericks' personal computer. He was enrolled in classes and doing well at Anne Arundel Community College last year thanks to a tuition waiver through the ILP program.

Back then, with ILP's help, he landed a well-paying job with United Parcel Service, bought a new car and found his own apartment. He had to work at Pizza Hut to make the car payments and child support, but he was making it work.

"It was working," Rich recalled with a grin. "I kept thinking, this is too good. Something is going to happen."

Something did.

Needing to have ankle surgery while still receiving medical assistance, Rich took time off from work.

But he hadn't been at the job long enough to earn disability pay, and during his convalescence, his car was repossessed. Unable to get to work, he lost his job and, just last month, his apartment.

Out of desperation, he again gave "Miss Trish" a call.

To make matters worse, the landlord kept all of Rich's 18 possessions, including an electric razor, winter coat and a set of bed sheets.

A slap in the face

To Mrs. Frederick, each loss is like a slap in the face.

"How do you prepare kids for life's trials when they're not your children?" she asked.

Just last week, she learned that one of "her children" _ a 21-yearold who had just graduated from ILP and was recently sent out on his own _ committed suicide in the detention center.

"Anyone else could have turned to Mom, Dad, uncles, aunts," she said, turning back to Rich's

predicament. "If I had only known he lost his car, I would have helped him find a new one. He could have kept the job."

And for each child like Rich, she said, "There are others at Jessup or the detention center who just get sick of it and go to drugs and crime. What else is there?"

For Rich, January brings basic training in South Carolina, then communications training in Georgia. And in four years, there may be college, money for Felicia and, he hopes, a career in computers.

Mrs. Frederick calls him a survivor.

Rich is working on it.

"All these years, I've been wanting this kind of life," he said, tapping his finger on the Fredericks' kitchen table. The room is alive with the sounds of shuffling hermit crabs and squawking parakeets, a droopy-eared Dalmatian and a crying baby. "Someday I'm going to have all the luxuries. I can't give up that chance."

seasonal highlight

TAKE THIS HEART

- Friday, January 9, 10:00 p.m. ET -

The day-to-day struggles and rewards of life in a Seattle foster family are captured in **TAKE THIS HEART**, a one-hour special that explores the complex issues surrounding foster care in America while focusing on the personal stories of three boys. The documentary airs on PBS Friday, January 9, 1998, 10:00 p.m. ET (check local listings). **TAKE THIS HEART** is introduced by actress Victoria Rowell ("Young and the Restless," "Diagnosis Murder"), who was in foster care during her own childhood and who today actively works on behalf of children in foster care.

One any given day, nearly half a million children in the United States are living in some form of foster care because their parents are unable or unwilling to care for them. This number has increased by 65 percent over the past decade, due to a variety of causes, including drug and alcohol abuse, AIDS, and physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Yet, despite their growing numbers and needs, children in foster care are often invisible in most communities.

TAKE THIS HEART explores the experiences of three children and their foster mother in one foster family, and in so doing, gives a voice to a population that is often not heard and generally not understood. The film spends eight months with this state-funded foster family, made up of Tess Thomas and the six children in her care. The film focuses on three of the boys in Thomas' home. Each of the boys has moved from one foster home to the next, eventually coming to live with Thomas. Each is struggling to make sense of his fate in his own way.

When he arrives at Thomas' house, 10-year-old Robert is lost and frightened, yet strangely inured to the trauma of being handed into the custody of a stranger. The program follows Robert as his anger and fear slowly give way to a tentative trust, and he allows Thomas into his life.

Celebrating his 14th birthday during the course of the film, Jamil walks a precarious line between an abiding, conflicted love for his birth mother, who struggles with drug addiction, and his desire for stability in the Thomas home.

Joaquin is a 17-year-old at the threshold of emancipation from the state foster care system. After five years in Thomas' household, he is struggling with the challenges that face him as he moves into adulthood - bright, articulate, but unable to read.

Shot in cinema verite style, **TAKE THIS HEART** is crafted from the modest and ordinary events of daily life. Small moments become dramatic, illuminating the sense of loss and hurt borne by these children. At the same time, the boys' stories reveal the remarkable resiliency and tough-minded will with which they go on with their lives. In association with the program, a major national outreach campaign, The Foster Care Project, will bring attention and coordinated action to foster care issues and outcomes, with an emphasis on building community resources to improve the lives of children and adolescents in foster care and the foster families that have stepped forward to care for them.

TAKE THIS HEART is a prime example of PBS' commitment to presenting programs that enlighten viewers to the many societal challenges in the United States.

Day & time: check with your local PBS station

credits

Underwriters: The Casey Family Program and The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Producer: Lark International in association with KCTS Seattle

Executive producer: Elizabeth Brock

Director: Kathryn Hunt

Producers: Jane Gibbons and Kathryn Hunt

Photography: Erik Daarstad

Associate producers: Kurt Streeter and Zola Mumford

Editor: Jeanne Slater

Music: Bruce Hunt

Format: CC STEREO

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Family To Family
Reconstructing Foster Care

A Program of the Annie E. Casey Foundation
and
The States of Alabama, Maryland, New Mexico, Ohio, and Pennsylvania
and
Jefferson County, Alabama
Los Angeles County, California
Chatham, Emanuel, Fulton, Jenkins, and Screven Counties, Georgia
Baltimore City, Anne Arundel and Prince George's Counties, Maryland
The City and County of Philadelphia
Columbia, Lehigh, and Northampton Counties, Pennsylvania
Cuyahoga and Hamilton Counties, Ohio

September 1997

The Annie E. Casey Foundation was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of United Parcel Service, and his siblings, George, Harry, and Marguerite, who named the philanthropy in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families.

The grant making of the Annie E. Casey Foundation is grounded in two fundamental convictions. First, there is no substitute for strong families to ensure that children grow up to be capable adults. Second, the ability of families to raise children well is often inextricably linked to conditions in communities where they live. We believe that community-centered responses can better protect children, support families, and strengthen neighborhoods.

Helping distressed neighborhoods become environments that foster strong, capable families is a complex challenge that will require progress in many areas, including changes in the public systems designed to serve disadvantaged children and their families. In most states, these systems are remote from the communities and families they serve; focus narrowly on individual problems when families in crisis generally have multiple difficulties; tend to intervene only when a problem is so serious that expensive institutionalization is the only response; and hold themselves accountable by the quantity of services offered rather than the effectiveness of the help provided.

Family foster care, the mainstay of all public child welfare systems, is in critical need of reform in each of these areas.

BACKGROUND: THE CURRENT CRISIS IN PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE back to menu

The nation's child welfare system continues in crisis. This crisis has four major characteristics:

1. The numbers of children removed from their families by the child welfare system has continued to grow, from 260,000 children in out-of-home care in the 1980's to more than 500,000 in care by 1995. This growth has been driven by increases in the number of children at-risk of abuse and neglect, as well as by the inability of child welfare systems to respond to the significantly higher level of need.

2. As these systems become overloaded, they are unable to safely return children to their families or to find permanent homes for them. Children are therefore experiencing much longer stays in temporary settings.

3. Concurrently, the number of foster families nationally has dropped, so that fewer than 50% of the children needing temporary care are now placed with foster families. As a result of this disparity, child welfare agencies in many urban communities have placed large numbers of children in group care or with relatives who have great difficulty caring for them. An infant coming into care in our largest cities has a good chance of being placed in group care and to be without a permanent family for more than four years.

4. Finally, children of color are vastly over represented in this group of disadvantaged children.

The duration and severity of the current crisis in child welfare makes this an opportune time for states to challenge themselves to rethink the fundamental role of family foster care and to consider very basic changes.

The Foundation's interest in helping communities and public agencies confront this crisis is built upon the belief that smarter and more effective responses are available to prevent child maltreatment and to respond more effectively when there is abuse or neglect. Often families can be helped to safely care for their children in their own communities and in their own homes--if appropriate support, guidance, and help is provided to them early enough. However, there are emergency situations that require the separation of a child from his or her family. At such times, every effort should be made to have the child live with caring and capable relatives or with another family within the child's own community--rather than in a restrictive, remote, institutional setting. Family foster care should be the next best alternative to a child's own home or to kinship care.

National leaders in family foster care and child welfare have come to realize, however, that **without major restructuring, the family foster care system in the United States is not in a position to meet the needs of children who must be separated from their families**. One indicator of the deterioration of the system has been the steady decline in the pool of available foster families at the same time as the number of children coming into care has been increasing. Further, there has been an alarming increase in the percentage of children in placement who have special and exceptional needs. If the family foster care system is not significantly reconstructed, the combination of these factors may result in more disrupted placements, longer lengths of stay, fewer successful family reunifications, and more damage done to children by the very system which the state has put in place to protect them.

A RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS: THE FAMILY TO FAMILY INITIATIVE back to menu

With the appropriate reforms in policy, in the use of resources, and in programs, family foster care can respond to the challenges of out-of-home placement and be a less expensive and more humane choice for children and youth than are institutions or other group settings. Family foster care reform, in and of itself, can yield important benefits for families and children--although such reform is only one part of a larger agenda designed to address the overall well-being of children and families currently in need of child protective services.

FAMILY TO FAMILY was designed in 1992 in consultation with national experts in child welfare. In keeping with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's guiding principles, the framework for the initiative is

grounded in the belief that reforms in family foster care must be focused on a more family-centered approach that is: (1) tailored to the individual needs of children and their families, (2) rooted in the child's community or neighborhood, (3) sensitive to cultural differences, and (4) able to serve many of the children now placed in group homes and institutions.

The FAMILY TO FAMILY Initiative has been an opportunity for states to reconceptualize, redesign, and reconstruct their foster care system to achieve **the following new system-wide goals**:

1. To develop a network of family foster care that is more neighborhood-based, culturally sensitive, and located primarily in the communities in which the children live.

2. To assure that scarce family foster home resources are provided to all those children (but to only those children) who in fact must be removed from their homes.

3. To reduce reliance on institutional or congregate care (in hospitals, psychiatric centers, correctional facilities, residential treatment programs, and group homes)--by meeting the needs of many more of the children currently in those settings through family foster care.

4. To increase the number and quality of foster families to meet projected needs.

5. To reunify children with their families as soon as that can safely be accomplished, based on the family's and children's needs--not simply the system's time frames.

6. To reduce the lengths of stay of children in out-of-home care.

7. To decrease the overall number of children coming into out-of-home care.

With these goals in mind, the Annie E. Casey Foundation selected and funded three states (**Alabama, New Mexico,** and **Ohio**) and five Georgia counties in August 1993 and two additional states (**Maryland** and **Pennsylvania**) in February 1994. In addition, **Los Angeles County** was awarded a planning grant in August 1996. States and counties funded through this initiative were asked to develop family-centered, neighborhood-based family foster care service systems within one or more local areas. Local communities targeted for the initiative were to be those which have had a history of placing large numbers of children out of their homes. The local sites would then become the first phase of implementation of the newly conceptualized family foster care system throughout the state.

The new system envisioned by FAMILY TO FAMILY is designed to:

- better screen children being considered for removal from home, to determine what services might be provided to safely preserve the family and/or what the needs of the children are;
- be targeted to bring children in congregate or institutional care back to their neighborhoods;
- involve foster families as team members in family reunification efforts;
- become a neighborhood resource for children and families and invest in the capacity of communities from which the foster care population comes.

The Foundation's role has been to assist states and communities with a portion of the costs involved in both planning and implementing innovations in their systems of services for children and families, and to make available technical assistance and consultation throughout the process. The Foundation also provided funds for development and for transitional costs that accelerate system change. The states, however, have been expected to maintain the dollar base of their own investment and sustain the changes they implement when Foundation funding comes to an end. The Foundation is also committed to accumulating and disseminating both lessons from states' experiences and information on the achievement of improved outcomes for children. We will therefore play a major role in seeing that the results of the FAMILY TO FAMILY Initiative are actively communicated to all the states and the federal government.

The states selected to participate in the planning process are being funded to create major innovations in their family foster care system--to **reconstruct** rather than merely supplement current operations. Such

changes are certain to have major effects on the broader systems of services for children, including other services within the mental health, mental retardation/developmental disabilities, education, and juvenile justice systems, as well as the rest of the child welfare system. In most states, the foster care system serves children who are also the responsibility of other program domains. In order for the initiative to be successful (to ensure, for example, that children are not inadvertently "bumped" from one system into another), representatives from each of these service systems were expected to be involved in planning and implementation at both the state and local level. These systems were expected to commit to the goals of the initiative, as well as redeploy resources (or priorities in the use of resources) and if necessary alter policies and practices within their own systems.

In summary, the FAMILY TO FAMILY Initiative is founded on a few key value judgments: Reforms in family foster care must be directed to producing a service that is **less disruptive** to the lives of the people it affects, more **community based** and **culturally sensitive**, more **individualized** to the needs of the child and family, more available as **an alternative to institutional placement**, and in general more **family centered**. Further, an enhanced family foster care system also can be consistent with an increased emphasis upon developing alternatives to out-of-home placement for children in the first place. Family foster care can be constructed to serve as a less restrictive setting for children that can speed reunification and assure that out-of-home placements which need to be made are not undertaken until all reasonable efforts to preserve families have been explored. Finally, as a result of the reform, family foster care services should also become a neighborhood resource for children and families, investing in the capacity of communities from which the foster care population comes.

CURRENT STATUS OF FAMILY TO FAMILY back to menu

At the outset of the initiative in 1992, the accepted wisdom among child welfare professionals was that a continuing decline in the numbers of foster families was inevitable; that large, centralized, public agencies could not effectively partner with neighborhoods; that disadvantaged communities could not produce good foster families in any numbers; and that substantial increases in congregate care were inevitable. FAMILY TO FAMILY is now showing that good foster families can be recruited and supported in the communities from which children are coming into placement. Further, dramatic increases in the overall number of foster families are possible, with corresponding decreases in the numbers of children placed in institutions, as well as in the resources allocated to such placements. Perhaps most important, FAMILY TO FAMILY is showing that child welfare agencies can effectively partner with disadvantaged communities to provide better care for children who have been abused or neglected. During 1997, child welfare practitioners and leaders--along with neighborhood residents and leaders--are beginning to develop models, tools, and specific examples (all built from experience) that can be passed on to other neighborhoods and agencies interested in such partnerships.

THE TOOLS OF FAMILY TO FAMILY back to menu

We believe that FAMILY TO FAMILY is providing to the nation a successful model of a foster care system that is neighborhood based, family focused, and culturally appropriate. There is also evidence that an audience exists at the community level, at the state level, and at the federal level for the tools that have been developed to build such a model.

However, all of us involved in FAMILY TO FAMILY quickly became aware that new paradigms, new policies, and new organizational structures were not enough to both make and sustain substantive change in the way society protects children and supports families. New ways of actually doing the work needed to be put in place in the real world. During 1997, therefore, the Foundation and our FAMILY TO FAMILY grantees developed a set of tools which we believe will help others build a neighborhood-based family foster care system. In our minds, such tools are indispensable elements of real change in child welfare.

Tools developed or used in FAMILY TO FAMILY include:

1. Successful strategies to recruit, train, and retain foster families

2. A decision making model for placement in child protection
3. A model to recruit and support relative care givers
4. New information system approaches and analytic tools
5. A self evaluation model
6. Methods to build partnerships between public child welfare agencies and the communities they serve.
7. New approaches to substance abuse treatment in a public child welfare setting
8. A model to enhance worker safety and build resilience among child protection staff
9. Communications planning in a public child protection environment, including how to respond to media crises
10. A model for partnership between public and private children service agencies
11. Strategies to support families when parents are in prison
12. Proven models which move children home or to other permanent families.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation and its state and local FAMILY TO FAMILY partners look forward to the opportunity to share their learnings with interested communities and agencies.

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National Alliance to End Homelessness

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Web of Failure: The Relationship Between Foster Care and Homelessness

Nan P. Roman • Phyllis Wolfe
National Alliance to End Homelessness
April, 1995

Introduction

I never felt like I was loved -- that anybody really cared. I felt like the black sheep of the family.
Latasha

In the late 1980s, the National Alliance to End Homelessness (the Alliance) began to hear from service providers around the country that a seemingly disproportionate number of homeless people had a foster care history. Although based largely on anecdotal information, providers reported that many of the people who were becoming homeless as adults had been in foster care when they were children, often spending years in a mixture of official foster care placements and other, less formal "placements" with relatives and friends. At this time, the Alliance was involved in a national project on the prevention of homelessness. We were motivated to pursue the foster care issue because we believed that if foster care and homelessness were somehow connected, interventions in the foster care system might help to prevent homelessness.

As we began to investigate, we discovered that during the 1980s, both foster care placements and homelessness increased in our nation. We also found some research on individual homeless programs, and among specific sub-populations of the homeless population, which did indeed indicate that people with a foster care history were over-represented among those homeless people surveyed. Moreover, there was evidence of an intergenerational aspect to the issue. That is, homeless people with a foster care history were more likely than other homeless people to have their own children in foster care.

With over 730,000 people homeless on any given night, the Alliance felt it was imperative to step-up our investigation of the relationship between foster care and homelessness to aid in the development of homelessness prevention strategies. So, in 1994 we initiated a research project to assess whether, across the nation and among all sub-populations of homeless people, there was a relationship between foster care and homelessness. Our findings are contained in this report.

A few parameters need to be established before examining the findings.

First, because of limited resources, this is a fairly modest study. We have only tested the water on the issue, although we have looked at a broad spectrum, both geographically and in terms of the demographic characteristics of the individuals surveyed. Second, we have defined foster care in a fairly strict sense as publicly supported out-of-home placements, including those in group homes. However, our survey did ask some questions about less official placements, and the interaction between foster care placements and other out-of-home placements is important and deserves further study.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness was encouraged and supported in this project by the Freddie Mac Foundation, and personally by Terri Freeman, its Executive Director, and Kathy Whelpley, its Associate Director. These two committed individuals quickly realized the important implications inherent in the connection between foster care and homelessness, and have worked with us throughout to develop a strong project. We also owe a great debt of thanks to Dr. Elizabeth Robertson, a member of the project's Advisory Committee, who helped us to design and implement a statistically strong research methodology, and then to accurately assess the findings. Dr. Ralph Nunez (and his colleague Aurora Zepeda), Judy Meltzer and Dr. Marsha Martin, all members of the Advisory Committee, gave generously of their time by guiding both the project's development and its conclusions. Notwithstanding the important contributions of all of these individuals, the contents of this report are the responsibility solely of the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Alliance Project Team

Deborah Chang
Mike Mayer
Adam Rasmussen

NOTE: An Appendix to this report has been published as a separate volume. It gives further detail on methodology and on research findings, and contains the full text of ten case studies. It also contains an Annotated Bibliography.

Executive Summary

The purpose of this project is to examine the connection between foster care and homelessness and to determine whether or not there is an over-representation of people with a foster care history in the homeless population.

In order to examine this issue, the project used four sources of information: (1) existing research on the connection between foster care and homelessness; (2) data collected from organizations which serve homeless people and which gather information on their clients' foster care history; (3) data obtained directly from a sample of homeless people; and (4) case studies of people who are or were homeless and who have a foster care history.

The principle findings of this study are as follows.

- There is an **over-representation** of people with a foster care history in the homeless population.

- Homeless people with a foster care history are more likely than other people to have **their own children in foster care.**
- Very frequently, people who are homeless had **multiple placements** as children: some were in foster care, but others were "unofficial" placements in the homes of family or friends.

In addition, there were certain demographic factors which were revealed by the research.

- Those people with a foster care history tend to become **homeless at an earlier age** than those who do not have a foster care history.
- Homeless people who are **white are somewhat more likely to have a foster care history** than people who are Hispanic or African American.
- Childhood placement in foster care can correlate with a substantial **increase in the length of a person's homeless experience.**

The research did not find (nor did it examine) that foster care directly caused homelessness. To the contrary, most children who experience foster care do not become homeless as adults. Rather, the indication was that foster care has an impact on personal risk factors that may eventually result in homelessness. Among the findings were the following.

- The foster care system often fails to help children deal with the **problems** that result from circumstances which caused them to be removed from their homes (these circumstances include physical or sexual abuse; parents with alcohol or substance abuse illness; family dissolution; etc.). Foster care can also fail to help children deal with problems that arise from foster care placements in abusive homes or facilities.
- **Alcohol and other substance abuse illnesses and mental illness** play a significant role in the relationship between foster care and homelessness.
- Youngsters emancipated from foster care often **lack the independent living skills** that would allow them to establish a household.
- People who have experienced extensive foster care, particularly multiple placements, extended group home placements, or foster care in combination with multiple unofficial placements, may become better **acculturated to institutionalized living** than to living on their own.
- Young people who are emancipated from foster care and become homeless tend to lack the **support networks** that other people can rely upon in times of crisis.
- Children who are moved from home to home over an extended period of time (foster care and/or unofficial placements) learn to **deal with problems by leaving them behind.**

It is clear from this study that what happens to children has a lifelong impact on them. When you see a homeless adult, it is quite possible that they are homeless because of people and systems that failed them as children. In order to eliminate any contribution foster care may make to homelessness, the National Alliance to End Homelessness makes the following recommendations.

- A better job must be done of supporting and strengthening families (particularly those in crisis) in order to keep children out of the foster care system.

- Once children are in the foster care system, extraordinary measures should be taken to move them quickly into a permanent living situation (family reunification or adoption), taking all necessary steps to avoid multiple placements.
- If children have experienced multiple placements, a much more directed effort should be made to help them gain the skills and other resources necessary to move to successful independence.
- The service and housing needs of homeless parents with a foster care history should be met so that their stability is promoted and their own children are not placed in foster care.
- Extraordinary steps should be taken to avoid placing children in foster care solely because of their parents' homelessness. Other measures (such as housing, employment and/or training, and services) should be taken, first.

Foster Care and Homelessness

This report examines the inter-relationship between foster care[1] and homelessness. Its purpose is to establish whether or not people with a foster care history are over-represented in the homeless population.

The Complex Nature of Homelessness

In order to properly understand any relationship between homelessness and foster care, we must first understand the complex nature of homelessness. Homeless people are the poorest of our nation's poor, and as such they reflect the face of poverty in America. They are families, primarily with one parent, but often with two. They are people who work but who do not earn enough to pay for housing. They are the unemployed -- those looking for work and those, young and old, who have never worked. And, they are women and children escaping from domestic violence.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that on any given night over 730,000 Americans are homeless. Over the course of a year, between 1.3 and 2 million Americans are homeless. This is the number of people who live on the streets, in emergency or transitional shelters, in cars or in abandoned buildings. It does not include the millions of people who are doubled up with family or friends; nor does it include people housed in institutions, or the millions more who are precariously housed -- paying such a large percentage of their incomes for rent that any unforeseen medical expense or temporary job loss could dislodge them. However, all of these individuals make up the pool from which people cycle in and out of homelessness.

The homeless population exhibits a wide variety of characteristics -- some homeless people have mental illness or substance abuse illness -- others are handicapped; some have a criminal justice history -- others are escaping from violent domestic situations; most are men, and minorities tend to be over-represented in the population. These are some of the characteristics of homeless people, but they are not the causes of their homelessness. The causes can be found in an inter-related set of socioeconomic factors that have become prominent over the past two decades.

- **Lack of affordable housing**. Over the past twenty years the

supply of housing available to low income people has declined. In 1970 there were twice as many low cost units available as there were low income households. By 1983 this number had been reversed -- there were two households competing for every available unit. Currently, some four million households receive federal housing assistance because they cannot afford housing without it; almost ten million households are eligible for such assistance but do not receive it because of lack of funding availability.

- **Decreasing incomes**. Over the past twenty years, neither wages nor benefits have kept pace with increases in the cost of living. In 1992, nearly 37 million Americans were poor, up five million since 1989. One in five Americans who works full-time earns a wage below the poverty level for a family of four: up 50% since 1979. For those who rely upon public benefits for income, the picture is no better. In 1992 the average combined value of AFDC and food stamps for a family of four was approximately 66% of the official poverty level. Between 1970 and 1992, AFDC benefits dropped in value by approximately 46%.

- **Health Issues**. The failure to address the increasingly important role drugs, disabilities and chronic health problems play in the lives of poor people has contributed to their vulnerability to homelessness. While alcohol and other substance abuse illnesses and other illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, etc. are on the increase, the availability of treatment has, in many cases, decreased or become prohibitively expensive. Similarly, the increase in poor pre-natal care related to poverty and the increase in teen-age mothers leads to economic and other pressures on families and individuals.

- **Family Instability.** In 1970 single parent families accounted for 14% of all families; by 1992 this had risen to 22%. In 1991, female headed households accounted for 39% of the poor population of the nation. Nearly half of all African-American children and over two-fifths of Hispanic-American children live in such households.

- **Families in Crisis.** One result of the economic and social changes described above is severe stress upon poor and very poor families. Parental stress is often manifested in the form of family violence. One example is child abuse and neglect, the reports of which have almost tripled since 1980. Other reactions to family stress are spousal abuse and divorce. Children who are abused or neglected, whose parents become homeless, or whose families otherwise dissolve often become involved in the foster care system.

The factors mentioned above, along with others, have contributed to the instability of individuals and households and eventually to their homelessness. Foster care, and the circumstances that lead up to it are part of this complex web of structural factors that result in homelessness. This report further examines one result of these structural social and economic changes in our society -- the relationship between foster care and homelessness.

Methodology

This study relied upon four sources of data: (1) existing research and

reports investigating the foster care history of homeless people; (2) data on foster care history gleaned from the intake or case management forms of organizations that ascertain clients' foster care histories; (3) a survey questionnaire administered, via homeless service and housing organizations, to a sample of homeless individuals; and (4) a series of case studies of homeless and formerly homeless people who have a foster care history. We chose to diversify our sources of information in order to avoid missing any critical point and to avoid over-emphasizing any finding.

Existing Research: Studies and reports chronicling the relationship between homelessness and foster care were examined. None of the existing research examined was comprehensive in that none was both national in scope and examined a broad spectrum of the homeless population. However, existing research did point out several important findings.

Collection of Data from Service/Housing Providers: The Alliance collected data from 21 homeless service organizations in every region of the country. Each organization provided client data for one winter week and one summer week. Requested information included total number of homeless people served, how many people had a foster care history, and how many of both groups had children in foster care. Data were received on 1,134 individuals.

Data from Sample Survey of Homeless Individuals: The Alliance worked with 40 homeless service and housing providers to distribute survey questionnaires to their clients and tenants. The questionnaires were to be self-administered. The surveys were designed to ascertain the individual's foster care history, their children's foster care history, and demographic information. 1,209 completed survey questionnaires were received by the Alliance.

Case Studies: Ten case studies were conducted in order to discover the process by which someone becomes homeless; the length of time between foster care emancipation and homelessness; any relationship between mental illness, alcohol and other substance abuse illness and foster care placement and homelessness; and other issues.

Results of the Research

As discussed above, four different sources of information were tapped in this research. The Executive Summary contains a compilation of the major findings from all sources. Following is more specific information obtained from each source. Results are organized according to the source of information. The Appendix (published separately) contains actual data.

Search of Existing Data

In our search of the literature we found no research on the connection between foster care and homelessness which examined a full spectrum of the homeless populations (veterans, families, singles, racial groups, etc.) and was national in scope. However, there were many more restricted studies, using non-representative samples, that examined the convergence of foster care and homelessness.

Several of these studies support the finding that there is an

over-representation of people with a foster care history in the homeless population. For example, Piliavin et al[2] found that of 331 homeless adults in Minnesota, 38.6% reported childhood placement in foster care, as opposed to 2% of the general population. Susser et al[3] found that of 223 men entering the New York City shelter system for the first time, 23% reported being placed in, "foster care, group homes, other special residences...." In a study of 1,228 New York City families, 10% of heads of households had been placed in foster care homes as children, and 10% reported having lived in a group home or institution.[4]

A key New York City study found that there may be an **intergenerational cycle** of foster care among homeless families.[5] "Homeless parents who had grown up in substitute care were almost twice as likely as parents with no such history to see their own children placed into the [foster care] system." 27% of homeless parents with a history of foster care had children in foster care versus 15% of homeless parents with no such history.

Other studies examined various trends among the subpopulations of homeless adults. Owen et al[6] found that in Minnesota, **rural or urban residence made very little difference** in the likelihood that a homeless person would have experienced foster care. Examining several types of rural facilities for homeless people, they found that 20% of the people in transitional housing had a childhood foster care experience; 20% of the women in battered women's shelters; and 13% of those in emergency shelters. In urban Minnesota, the numbers were 21% in transitional housing; nearly 22% in the battered women's shelters; and 26% in emergency shelters.

Homeless **women** were found to be more likely to have experienced foster care (17%) than men (10%) in a study of 1,400 homeless people in northern California.[7] Among men, Davis and Winkleby[8] examined the issue in light of ethnic or racial affiliation. They found that homeless **Caucasian men** were most likely to have experienced foster care (13%), followed by native-born Hispanic men (10%) and African-American men (7%). Winkleby and Fleshin[9] found that 12% of homeless **veterans** had a foster care history. Rosenheck and Fontana[10] found that foster care had a, "significant direct relationship to homelessness," among veterans. Homeless **youth** are also more likely to have been in foster care at some time in their lives. In a Chicago study[11] it was found that 45% of homeless youth interviewed reported that they had been wards of the Department of Child and Family Services.

Physical and mental health problems also interact in the homelessness and foster care equation. Those homeless people with physical or mental health problems seem to have higher rates of childhood foster care placement than those without these problems. Winkleby and White[12] found that homeless adults with substance abuse illness, physical health problems or history of psychiatric hospitalization when they first became homeless were more likely to have been in foster care (13.3%) than those not reporting such disorders (8.2%). Susser et al[13] found that for homeless people with a history of psychiatric treatment, 15% had been in foster care and an additional 10% in group homes.

Some research demonstrates that childhood placement in foster care has an affect upon the nature of adult homelessness. For example, Piliavin et al[14] found that childhood placement in foster care substantially increased the **length of a person's homeless experience**.

Many of these reports examine or speculate upon what causes this connection between foster care and homelessness. In summary, they point to the following.

- The foster care system can fail to adequately deal with problems caused by sexual or physical abuse, or troubled or dysfunctional families.
- The foster care system can fail to adequately deal with physical or mental health problems of children.
- Caregivers assigned by the foster care system can be abusive.
- Multiple placements can preclude the development of nurturing bonds that have been shown to be critical to normal personal development.
- Institutionalization can be established as the normative life style for children in the foster care system.
- Children in foster care may be unable to establish support networks that can carry over into adulthood.
- The foster care system can fail to help its wards achieve educational and training goals.
- Foster care may improperly prepare children for emancipation.
- Children in foster care may have difficulty making the transition from a dependence mode to an independence mode.

Data Collected from Service/Housing Providers

Information was received from 21 organizations concerning 1,134 people participating in their programs during two, one-week periods during 1994. The data was compiled from case files. Of those homeless individuals for whom data was obtained:

- 36.2% had a foster care history.
- Of those with a foster care history who were parents, 77% had at least one child who had a foster care history or was in foster care.
- Of those without a foster care history who were parents, 27% had at least one child who had a foster care history or was in foster care.

Data From Homeless Individuals

Data was collected directly from 1,209 clients and tenants via a self-administered survey questionnaire. Of those surveyed in this manner:

- 9% reported having lived in a foster care or group home.[15]
- 43% reported having lived outside of their home when they were children.
- 16% of the respondents who were parents and had a foster care history had their children in foster care or a group home versus 7% of those who did not have a foster care history.
- 23% of mixed race homeless people reported a foster care history; 13% of Native American people; 12% of Caucasian homeless people; 8% of African-American homeless people; and 5.3% of Hispanic homeless people.
- 13% of female homeless respondents reported a foster care or group home history versus 7% of male respondents.

Case Studies

Ten case studies were conducted around the country. All were arranged by service or housing provider organizations. The case studies show us many things that empirical data does not, most fundamentally how foster care fits into the homelessness experience. Case study synopses are scattered throughout this report and the full case studies appear in the Appendix (published under separate cover). Following are some of the findings from the case studies.

- The foster care system often fails to provide children with any type of therapy to help them to address the problems that brought them into the system in the first place. These problems include the effects of sexual and physical abuse, family dissolution, alcohol and substance abusing parents, abandonment or being orphaned, as well as their own behavioral problems.
- Foster care placements can, themselves, be abusive situations. Several of the respondents were sexually and physically abused in their foster families.
- Children in foster care may fail to learn the nature of stable family life.
- Children in foster care may never experience unconditional acceptance and love. This may result in feelings of insecurity and self doubt, both when they are children and as adults.
- Multiple placements (either in the foster care system or in a mixture of official and unofficial placements) can teach children that the way to deal with problems is simply to exit the situation -- go somewhere new.
- Multiple placements seem to inhibit the ability of the foster care system to provide treatment to children for their disturbances or illnesses.
- Foster care may not prepare children for independent living.
- Frequently, alcohol and substance abuse illness interacts with foster care and homelessness. Several respondents describe using alcohol and drugs to escape their problems. One described abusing substances as another way of running away from his problems.
- Children recognize the difference between parents and foster parents, who are paid to take care of them.
- Foster care can fail to help people develop networks of support that they can use when they fall upon hard times as adults.
- People who have had a foster care history often manage to hold things together for a while after they become adults, but many eventually find themselves unprepared to maintain residential stability.
- People who were in foster care as children may find their own children placed in foster care or in unofficial out-of-home placements.
- Some people, especially those who were in foster care for a limited time, were pleased to have been removed from unbearable situations and felt foster care had done its job. In at least one case, this reassured a parent that it could be beneficial to place her own children in foster care.

Summary

All sources of data support the primary finding that people with a foster care history are over-represented in the homeless population. Numerous sources, including the data collected from individual homeless people, indicate that there is an intergenerational aspect to the problem. Also

there is a strong indication that unofficial placements with relatives and friends often supplement official placements and lead to a series of multiple placements which can be very disruptive to a child's development.

The sources also indicate some interesting demographic and causal factors. Among homeless people, women are more likely to have a foster care history than men and Caucasians are more likely than Hispanic people or African-American people to have a foster care history. Some subpopulations of the homeless population, including youth and veterans, also exhibit a tendency to have disproportionate representation of foster care histories.

The research does not indicate that foster care, itself, causes homelessness. Rather, foster care seems usually to be one element in a complex web of familial, social and institutional failures that affect some children. All indications are that this web of failures occurs more often for poor children. The result is that by the time children become adults, they are unable to establish independent households or to maintain residential stability, and have fewer economic and social supports to fall back on.

One way to prevent people from becoming homeless is to intervene when they are children and before they become caught up in this structural web of failure. Foster care is designed to intervene in this way for children. Obviously, for some children, its intervention is not adequate. The Alliance recommends working first to strengthen at-risk families. If children do enter the foster care system, they should be moved through it and out into a stable residential situation as soon as possible. The foster care system was not meant to provide long term care. Clearly, when it does so, one result can be homelessness.

CASE STUDIES

Absence of a nurturing family life leads to low self esteem.

Latasha
Birmingham, Alabama

[The foster care system] pretty much called me a nuisance.

Latasha is a 24 year old white female. She has never been married, has no children and has a ninth grade education. She has been homeless periodically since she was emancipated from foster care at age 18. She currently lives at a hotel where she is in training for a job cleaning rooms.

Latasha was taken from her birth parents at 4 years of age because of physical and sexual abuse. She was placed in a foster home where she remained until she was 13. Although she thinks of her foster parents as her family, she never felt fully accepted by them. And in fact, when she was 13 she began to drink and her foster parents asked to have her removed from their home. She lived for the next 5 years in a series of institutional settings, moving from group homes to mental hospitals, to emergency rooms to half-way houses. She repeatedly tried to commit

suicide and abused drugs and alcohol. Basically, this way of life continued after emancipation, except that the group homes were replaced by the streets or by homeless facilities. Although she currently has a job, which also provides her with a place to live, her situation does not appear overly stable.

Multiple placements interfere with treatment.

Michael
Birmingham, Alabama

I just left [my living situation]. The plan was to get away from all the problems

Michael is a 29 year old white male, employed and living in his own apartment. He was homeless some six years ago.

Michael's parents divorced when he was five. His father had custody, but he lived with various relatives until he was 11 when he finally moved in with his father. When he was 13 he was removed from this home because of sexual abuse by his father.

From age 13 until he ran away at age 16, he had a series of foster placements too numerous to count. Some were emergency placements, some were group homes, two were long term placements that eventually asked to have him removed because of his behavior. Although he feels that he had problems controlling his emotions during this period, he never received any therapy. This seems to have been due primarily to his constant movement from placement to placement.

Michael found himself in a bad situation after he ran away at age 16, and he got in touch with the State office of child welfare to ask for help. He was informed that he had been dropped from their files -- this despite the fact that he was still a minor. Left on his own, he began to abuse alcohol and drugs. Although he held things together for quite a while, working and going to school, eventually everything fell apart. He wandered the country, became homeless and intermittently abused substances and tried to commit suicide. Finally he hit bottom and had a personal realization that he needed, and wanted, to pull his life together. He has now reclaimed his life with excellent prospects.

Children in foster care may not learn how to live independently.

Dan
Portland, Oregon

I think the best way for me to have grown up would have been to have a decent mother and father raise me.

Dan is a 24 year old white male living with his girlfriend and her two children. He has just been released from prison.

Dan's father was sentenced to prison on a murder and robbery conviction just before Dan's birth. Until he was eight, Dan moved around the country staying with family members. His day-to-day care was the responsibility of his much-resented older sister.

At eight, Dan received his first in a series of placements in group homes and juvenile treatment facilities. He seems to have been an "open case" until he was 16 when he ran away to the street, joining a group or gang he called the Brotherhood. He describes the Brotherhood as his only real family. He continued to live on the streets until he was 19, supported by his association with the Brotherhood and intermittently utilizing various programs for troubled and street youth.

At 19 Dan was convicted of armed robbery and spent the next five years in several correctional facilities. He does not have a negative view of this experience, in part because many of his friends from the Brotherhood were also in the correctional system.

Dan is now living in a substandard apartment with his girlfriend and her children. She has recently completed a substance abuse program. He is not using drugs, but is selling them until he finds employment.

Drugs and alcohol interact in the relationship between foster care and homelessness.

Sara
Seattle, Washington

I really have a lot of anger and hostility about what happened. I think it really caused my sister and I to have a lot of problems in later life.

Sara is a 39 year old white, female single parent. She lives in a transitional apartment with her 15 year old son, and is moving to a permanent apartment shortly. Sara has been substance free for three months, and she and her son, who is also in recovery, are struggling to remain "clean and sober."

Sara lived with her mother and two sisters in public housing until she was seven when her mother was hospitalized for a nervous breakdown. Sara and her sisters were placed with a foster family 40 miles away. While in foster care, she has only vague memories of being visited by a case worker, and no recollection of any real discussion with him.

This is especially notable because Sara was sexually abused by the natural son of her foster parents. She reported this to her foster mother and to the police, but her pleas fell on deaf ears. She was full of rage about the situation.

At age ten the sisters were reunited with their mother, who soon remarried. The relationship with her parents was stormy and Sara eventually moved in with a friend's family. A period of abusive marriages, alcohol and drugs ensued. At twenty-five, and on her third husband, Sara had her son Michael. The cycle of substance abuse and treatment continued. During one difficult period, she placed Michael with her mother. Eventually she and Michael became homeless. Michael dropped out of school, became a member of a gang, and used and sold drugs. Sara has recently been diagnosed as manic depressive. She and Michael are in recovery.

Foster care placements can, themselves, be abusive situations.

Gina
Washington, D.C.

I was not putting my children in foster care; I was not giving them up.

Gina is a 38 year old African-American mother of five and grandmother of two. She has been homeless, but recently moved into a five bedroom home.

Gina was abandoned at birth and placed in a loving foster home for five years. When her foster mother became ill, Gina was sent to their relative's home where she was tormented by the family's ten children and sexually molested by the father and older sons. Her foster mother died when Gina was 13 and she was officially placed with this abusive family. The sexual, and soon physical, abuse continued and Gina's pleas for help went unheard. At age 15 she moved in with some friends and was allowed to stay. She was stable for two years.

As an adult, Gina began having children and eventually this resulted in her being evicted from her apartment for overcrowding. This was the beginning of a cycle of homelessness and drug abuse. She was determined, because of her own horrible experiences, that her children would never be put in foster care. However, her drug abuse eventually overcame her. Her children were placed with a foster family.

After hitting bottom, Gina got herself into a recovery program and eventually back on her feet. With help from numerous homeless programs, she has regained custody of her children and moved into a stable home.

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13. Susser, E., A. Conover & E. Streuning. "Childhood Antecedents of Homelessness in Psychiatric Patients." American Journal of Psychiatry, Vol. 148:8, August, 1991. *Back to text.*
14. Piliavin (1990), op.cit. *Back to text.*
15. We believe that the discrepancy between data collected by the service providers and that collected in self-administered questionnaires was due to the different methods of administering the questionnaire. It is our suspicion that people under-reported their foster care history on self-administered questionnaires either because of misunderstanding or unwillingness to divulge information. In light of this, the Alliance maintains that the 9% represents a baseline figure in understanding the over-representation of people with a foster care history among the homeless population. That is, a minimum of 9% of homeless people are likely to have been in foster care as children. *Back to text.*

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EX-FOSTER CHILDREN EXIT SYSTEM WITH FEW SKILLS, LITTLE SUPPORT

BYLINE: By Beth Frerking Newhouse News Service

Alfred Perez, 21, a former foster youth in California, is a classic example of beating the odds. He survived an abusive mother and, later, taunts from fellow foster youths (for being a bookworm) to graduate from San Jose State University and get a job helping foster children.

He is an exception, unfortunately.

In one of the only studies of its kind, researchers at the University of Wisconsin in Madison have found that young adults who are a year to 18 months out of foster care have lower rates of education and employment, and are more likely to have been jailed, homeless and victimized than their peers in general.

The study revealed a vast gulf between how prepared these youths thought they were when it came to the skills of daily living -- how to find a job or get an apartment -- and how successful they were once on their own.

Mark Courtney and Irving Piliavin, at the university's School of Social Work and Institute for Research on Poverty, began interviewing about 140 foster youths who were still in the system in 1995, and then followed up 12 to 18 months after their release from the system.

All had been in foster care for at least 18 months prior to emancipation. Nine of 10 said they believed their placement in foster care was necessary, and most had a positive attitude toward the system.

While still in care, most had high hopes for their futures. Eight out of 10 said they expected to enter college. Two-thirds reported feeling prepared to get a job and find a place to live.

But a mere year to 18 months later, they met a distressing reality. Nearly 40 percent hadn't completed high school. Only 9 percent attended college. Nearly a quarter had lived in at least four different places since their release from foster care -- and 12 percent had been literally homeless at least once, living either on the streets or in a shelter.

Only about half had jobs, and those who had jobs, on average, earned less than the minimum wage.

A quarter of the young men, and 15 percent of the women, reported serious physical victimization, described as being "beaten up, choked, strangled or smothered, attacked with a weapon, tied up, held down or blindfolded" against their will.

Additionally, one of every 10 of the women reported having been sexually assaulted.

One-fifth had been jailed at least once, including a quarter of the men and 10 percent of the women.

Courtney believes the study is especially telling, since it included former foster youth from all over Wisconsin -- not only those from the most beleaguered Milwaukee neighborhoods.

Contrast these foster youths to middle-class and blue-collar kids who use their parents' homes as a backstop between college (or high school) and that first job, Courtney said. The findings provide bleak illustrations of how the lack of family support can mean the difference between a safe place to sleep and living on the streets.

"These kids are really disabled in many ways by the system," he said.

Courtney was being only slightly facetious when he said, "In many places, you get a better deal coming out of prison than coming out of foster care. " Ex-cons often get probation officers, "gate money" and a temporary bed in a halfway house.

And sadly, many of these youths may be headed for prison. As Courtney and his colleagues wrote in the report: "Policy makers interested in crime prevention would be hard pressed to find a group at higher risk of incarceration than the males in our sample.

"In short," they continued, "it appears that the glass is little more than half full for the bulk of the young adults we interviewed and near empty for many of the rest."