

Grown up and out: What's after foster care?

Young people who leave the system face a rough road

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BY LIZ COBBS

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When he turned 19, Jermaine Campbell thought he was ready to live on his own.

Campbell had been in foster care since he was 11. He had lived in 10 foster homes and three residential facilities and was tired of shuffling from place to place.

But soon after leaving a transitional independent living program, Campbell found himself living on the streets.

He carried his clothes and personal items around in garbage bags. He slept in parking garages for about two months, sometimes breaking into cars to sleep in the back seat. He ate meals at a shelter or at an alternative education school he was attending. When hungry and desperate, Campbell said he stole from a grocery store “just to eat.”

“When you leave foster care, the only preparation you get is in money management,” said Campbell, now 20. “No one prepares you for life and life hits you hard. When you try to take that first step and you fall down, there’s no love out there.”

Campbell said he stayed at the Robert J. Delonis Center in downtown Ann Arbor for about three months but was eventually kicked out of the homeless shelter because he stayed too long. Shelter rules allow individuals to stay there for up to 90 days.

Campbell and other young people who left foster care without being adopted or reunited with their families say it’s hard to make it on their own. They fall behind in school or drop out and have trouble finding jobs and affordable living situations.

Building a support system

In Michigan, youths can stay in foster care until they turn 20 but can leave at 18 if they choose. An independent living program provides money for room and board and up to \$5,000 a year for educational or vocational training until age 21. After that, they’re on their own.

The number of youths in this situation is rising. Michigan Department of Human Services statistics show 525 youths aged out of the foster care system in 2006, up from 481 in 2005. In Washtenaw County, 20 youths aged out in 2006, six more than in 2005.

Cynthia Maritato, director of Washtenaw County’s DHS office, said her staff has been trying to get ahead of the problem by working with youths still in foster care to better prepare them for living independently. DHS has also been reaching out to community partners for assistance, Maritato said.

Susan Reynolds Bunton, DHS contract administrator in Washtenaw County and Family to Family coordinator, said community members are needed to provide “door openers,” such as internships, jobs, transportation - even discount hair cuts.

The Student Advocacy Center of Michigan also works to assist youths transitioning from foster care. It's not uncommon for SAC Executive Director Leslie Harrington or her staff to drive former foster care youths to class or even to the grocery store in between their daily work duties.

"Their lives are so chaotic," Harrington said of youths who have left foster care. "To find a place to stay, hold down a job and go to school is nearly impossible. If we don't keep them in high school or keep them in college, these kids will become the next homeless."

The center receives about \$50,000 a year in grants from the Speckhard-Knight Charitable Foundation and the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation Youth Council to assist youths transitioning from foster care.

'No path to follow'

Maintaining a stable living situation is not easy, teenagers say.

Kayla Holley, 19, said she got an apartment last year, but her roommate abruptly left after four months. She moved out because she could not pay rent on her own and stayed with a friend in Westland.

"This past year has been the hardest year of my life," Holley said.

She said she wants a job but has to first get a driver's license for identification purposes. She said plans to finish her General Educational Development requirements in May.

"When I finish my GED and walk across the stage, that would be the best thing I can do for myself right now," said Holley, who has lived in three foster homes and two group homes. "When I do that, I'm going to feel like I'm No. 1."

Education is the key to surviving foster care as well as surviving life, said Brandon Johnson, 18, who's in the independent living program.

"We are the next generation, we are the future," said Johnson, who's enrolled at Washtenaw Community College. "Do you honestly want a future full of illiterate men and women?"

Johnson said when he was younger, he wanted to be a doctor. But life took a toll on his dream. His mother died when he was 4, Johnson said, and his father has been in and out of his life over the years, he said. He's been in eight different living situations, including living with his grandmother. He entered the foster care system at age 9.

"I became angry," he said. "I wanted to succeed, I had the ambition, I had the drive, but there was no path to follow. It was like walking in the jungle at night."

An armed robbery conviction landed him an eight-month stint at a state juvenile facility. It was while he was locked up, Johnson said, that he came to understand the value of learning and earned a GED. "I found my home inside of books," he said.

Johnson has since become a father of two children, which he says has further motivated him to earn a criminal justice degree. His plan is to work with youths involved in the foster care system.

"If I can help one or two kids, maybe they can help change this system," Johnson said.

Meanwhile, Campbell is taking GED classes while applying for jobs and looking for another place to live. He can't afford the room rent at the house in Ypsilanti where he is living.

Campbell, who now receives Supplemental Security Income of \$623 monthly, said his goals are to have his own apartment - not just a rental room, his own car and a job.

Campbell said he keeps getting turned down for jobs, such as waiting tables or being a cashier, because he doesn't have previous work experience. That gets him down sometimes, he said.

“Basically, when I put all my eggs in one basket, all my eggs usually get crushed,” he said. “It discourages me sometimes and makes me not try sometimes ... (but) you just gotta keep on pushing.”

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Help for struggling youths

The state Department of Human Services operates the Michigan Youth Opportunity Initiative, funded by the Jim Casey Foundation, an incentive-based program for youths and young adults age 14 to 24 who have been in foster care or have aged out of the system.

Among other things, the initiative allows youths to open savings accounts with a dollar-for-dollar match from the state, up to \$1,000 a year. MYOI also has statewide youth advisory boards, including one in Washtenaw County, to raise awareness of and call for action on issues affecting older youth in foster care.

DHS also has a program called Building Community Partners. DHS workers meet with area businesses, nonprofit groups and interested individuals to encourage them to provide services in such areas as education, employment, health care and housing.

- To donate or to get involved: Call Renee Smith at 734-481-2034 or e-mail her at smithr25@michigan.gov.

Source: Renee Smith, MYOI coordinator, Washtenaw County DHS.

Those who leave, by the numbers

A Wayne State University study released in October found that, among youth who left foster care:

17% had been homeless, having spent an average of two months on the street.

27% spent time in jail.

48% had children of their own.

71% reported being sexually or physically victimized.

\$600 The earnings per month of those who worked; the most common job was in the fast food industry. Youths were unemployed for long periods.

Note: The average age of the 264 youths interviewed was 20, and they had been out of foster care an average of 3 1/2 years.

Source: “Youth Aging Out of Foster Care in Southeast Michigan: A Follow-up Study, October 2006” by psychologists Patrick J. Fowler and Paul A. Toro, Wayne State University.

Suggestions for solutions

A 45-member statewide task force in 2006 made 21 recommendations for helping older youths in foster care. The task force included youths who were or had been in foster care as well as representatives from government, schools and nonprofit agencies.

Some recommendations, such as extending foster care to age 21, are being studied. Among the recommendations that have been acted on:

- Housing assistance for homeless foster youth. The Michigan State Housing Development Authority has allocated \$3 million to provide rental assistance for young people ages 18-24, for a maximum of two years.
- Extended Medicaid coverage, to age 21.

- Proper documentation. Youth who have been in foster care need to have birth certificates, Social Security cards or other government-issued IDs, which are necessary to open bank accounts or get jobs.

Source: Interdepartmental Task Force on Service to At-Risk Youth Transitioning to Adulthood.

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