

Life After Foster Care

Even with extended benefits, foster children face daunting challenges

BY SARA PECK



Foster children Marshawn (right) and Maleek hug a new puppy in New York City.

CHRIS HONDROS/GETTY IMAGES

SHANTAYE WONZER CAN'T REALLY remember being anything but a foster kid. In the past 18 years, she's moved more than 15 times, been abandoned by her adoptive parents and lived in two group homes. Yet this September, on her 21st birthday, she says her life will become even more difficult. Wonzer will no longer be a ward of the state, and will have to forfeit all services and support that she has until now received.

"The hardest part will be knowing that I won't have anywhere to turn to for help," says Wonzer, a junior at Bradley University in Peoria, Ill. "I've been able to build up a network around me, but it

still doesn't change the fact that I'm losing the closest thing that I have had to a parent for the last 18 years."

Until 2007, Illinois' foster children were emancipated at age 18, moving them from sheltered home life to complete independence. Illinois was the first state to extend emancipation to age 21, and Vermont is the only other state to use state money to extend services to age 21, if a youth chooses to remain in the program. (A bill proposed by Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) in May 2007 would provide federal funding to allow kids nationwide to stay in care longer, but the bill is still in its infancy.)

Kendall Marlowe, deputy director of communications for the Illinois Depart-

ment of Child and Family Services, says extending care would not necessarily alleviate the difficulties faced by foster youths who "age out" at 21.

"No matter how good the system gets, all foster children will hit that fateful day without family connections," he says. "People say that there are holes in the system and that kids fall through, but I know better than they do that that's the truth. Kids in foster care have so many more challenges."

But an extra three years is by no means an ideal situation for many youths whose inevitable emancipation without much state assistance is merely delayed.

Amy Dworsky, a lead researcher at the Chicago-based Chapin Hall Center for

Children, a research institute affiliated with the University of Chicago, says that because Illinois extends care past age 18, teens are given fewer services after they leave care compared with other states.

Since 2002, Dworsky has been following more than 700 foster care youth in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin as they leave foster care and transition into independent living.

“But because [kids can remain in care until 21], there’s certainly a gap in the after-services provided,” she says.

Job search services, Medicaid coverage and housing programs are often unavailable to emancipated foster youth. Only 40 percent of the foster youths Dworsky studied held a job, 40 percent said they did not have enough money to buy clothing and 34 percent had been arrested.

Only 46 percent of young adults surveyed by Chapin Hall said they had savings accounts, compared with 82 percent of youths not in foster care. These economic hardships leave most of them uninsured, Dworsky says.

“When they leave the system, they lose their Medicaid coverage and, as a result, they lose access to medical and mental healthcare that they need,” says Dworsky, who points out that Illinois has not extended medical coverage to age 21. Shortly after she released the study’s findings, Wisconsin included Medicaid for emancipated foster youths in its upcoming budget.

In Wisconsin, 80 percent of foster kids stay in fewer than two homes, compared to 50 percent of Illinois’ foster children. The average stint in foster care for Iowa’s children is only 18 months.

Both Iowa and Wisconsin have significantly higher reunification rates than Illinois, where only about 40 percent of state wards are returned to their biological parents. What’s more, the number of abused youths in Illinois is nearly double that of Iowa and Wisconsin combined.

At Our Children’s Homestead (OCH) in Naperville, Ill., which specializes in placing mentally and emotionally disabled foster teens, 90 percent of kids are on psychotropic medication for bipolar disorder, depression or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Duncan Ward, a caseworker at OCH,

says most of the youths he works with have been in at least 10 foster homes and need additional services and support. He says most of his cases are like 16-year-old Billy, who was born addicted to crack cocaine and has attempted suicide four times in the past year. Billy is currently at the Chicago Lakeshore Hospital after being kicked out of his 12th foster home. [Ed.

'I worked with a 21-year-old kid who said that he thought he'd be better off in jail. That's pretty shocking. The girls are luckier since they usually have babies and can go on welfare.'

Note: “Billy” is a pseudonym.]

“We’re dealing with severely damaged kids,” Ward says. “We need people who are willing to work 110 percent to help them, and that’s hard to come by.”

Once emancipated, the more than 50 percent of uninsured OCH teens could apply for public assistance money, Ward says, but most do not.

“They look at insurance as another bill, so they don’t follow up on it,” he says. “My kids have said they feel like being on medication is embarrassing, so they don’t want to do it. They just aren’t ready to juggle a job, bills and responsibilities.”

Gaps in education, medical care and emotional support often predispose foster kids for “almost every social ill imaginable,” says Marlowe of Illinois’ Department of Child and Family Services.

In 2007, the National Association of Social Workers found that, nationwide, 80 percent of state prison inmates had been through the foster care system.

“I worked with a 21-year-old kid who said that he thought he’d be better off in jail,” says Joe Roszkowski, a clinical psychologist at OCH. “That’s pretty shocking. The girls are luckier since they usually have babies and can go on welfare.”

Services aren’t the only shortage. Finding homes for children, especially those with special needs, is also a struggle.

“We’re really badly in need of foster homes,” says Marissa Allen, vice president of child welfare services at OCH. “But it’s difficult because nobody wants

to take a hostile 16-year-old with special needs; typical teens are hard enough.”

Nonprofit and community-based organizations like OCH handle 70 percent to 80 percent of child placements, Marlowe says.

Though the number of children in foster homes has fallen 69 percent since 1997 due to a statewide push toward

adoption, Allen says OCH received a large number of kids from failed adoptions filed during this period.

The shortage continues to harm children as they bounce between homes or are left in abusive environments.

Katie Belleville, 20, of Glenview, Ill., fought to leave her abusive parents for five years before turning 18 and gaining legal independence.

“(The police) just kept sending me back to an abusive environment,” she says. “They told me that no one was going to want to foster an 18-year-old.”

But some people do. Charlotte Crawford, 44, has fostered more than 23 children in the past 19 years in her Crest Hill, Ill., home. She’s worked with severely disabled children, including one teenage boy who ran away to Indiana almost daily, and a girl who underwent brain surgery.

Crawford says her three biological children—two daughters and one son—have benefited from growing up surrounded by special-needs foster children. When Crawford’s youngest daughter was a toddler, two 16-year-old boys with special needs were living with them. Crawford recalled how the boys tried to teach her how to walk.

“You would have thought that they were little old men running around after her, making sure they she didn’t fall,” she says. “It’s amazing to see how these hardened kids can really care for younger children and change.” ■



Is the Fourth Estate a Fifth Column?

Corporate media colludes with democracy's demise

BY BILL MOYERS

I heard this story a long time ago, growing up in Choctaw County in Oklahoma before my family moved to Texas. A tribal elder was telling his grandson about the battle the old man was waging within himself. He said, "It is between two wolves, my son. One is an evil wolf: anger, envy, sorrow, greed, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other is the good wolf: joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The boy took this in for a few minutes and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf won?"

The old Cherokee replied simply, "The one I feed."

Democracy is that way. The wolf that wins is the one we feed. And in our society, media provides the fodder.

Our media institutions, deeply embedded in the power structures of society, are not providing the information that we need to make our democracy work. To put it another way, corporate media consolidation is a corrosive social force. It robs people of their voice in public affairs and pollutes the political culture. And it turns the debates about profound issues into a shouting match of polarized views promulgated by partisan apologists