

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Foster care overhaul - some say long overdue - on governor's desk

By Julian Guthrie  
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Kristal McCoy's mother was an alcoholic. Her father was not around. When she was 13, when her great-grandmother could no longer care for her, she was handed over to the state. She had 16 social workers and 10 foster homes in five years. When she was "aged out" at 18, she became homeless.

More than 77,000 foster children live in California, more than in any other state. For decades, members of this largely invisible population have been moved from home to home until they were "emancipated" at age 18 and cut off from services.

But the safety net for these youths might be expanding soon. Nine foster care overhaul bills are in front of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to be signed or vetoed by Oct. 14. In Washington, a bill introduced by U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., seeks to extend benefits for foster youth to the age of 21.

Experts and policymakers see the beginning of a revolution in a long-beleaguered system.

"Foster care in any state represents about 1 percent of the child population," said Jill Duerr Berrick, a UC Berkeley professor and author of a forthcoming book on foster care. "For that reason, it's easy to marginalize or ignore that population. But in my view, foster youth are the most critically vulnerable children in the U.S. As citizens, we have a special responsibility to them that is different to other children."

Former Democratic state Sen. John Burton, who founded the John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes, has lobbied former colleagues and the governor on various foster care ideas. His foundation is co-sponsor of a bill before the governor that would make California the first state to screen foster youth at age 16 for mental and physical disabilities. Those with special needs would receive supplemental income upon emancipation.

"It's pretty obvious that when you dump a kid out into the street at age 18, there's going to be a problem," Burton said, noting the state made enormous strides this year by allotting \$35.7 million for transitional housing for aged-out foster youth, compared with \$4.8 million in the 2006-07 budget year.

The state-funded transitional housing program served 1,300 emancipated youth between the ages of 18 and 24 in 44 counties this year, while only 450 youth in five counties were helped last year.

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*-Former State Senator John Burton*

"The issue is getting more attention, but I still think a majority of Americans don't understand foster care," Burton said. "There are people who think these kids are placed in nice homes and everything is wonderful. I talk to these kids and hear that this girl had 30 placements, or this boy had 33 different foster homes. I think of my own youth. I was a kid who was always acting out. My father and mother were there to get upset, so I had to straighten up. These are kids with no family anchor."

Burton is working with Boxer on her bill to extend federal funding to foster youth to the age of 21. A handful of states, notably Iowa and Illinois, have extended funding to allow youth to voluntarily remain in foster care until age 21.

"It's in the early stages," Burton said of the Boxer bill. "Barbara has made it a top domestic priority. I don't know if it will

happen this year, but it will eventually happen at the federal level."

Today, there are more than 520,000 youth in foster care in America. The federal government provides 50 percent of funding, with counties and cities picking up the rest. Programs and services vary greatly by county.

In the Bay Area, there is an array of programs for foster children and their families, from those that help preschool-age children who have behavioral problems to those that aid young adults interested in jobs or college.

The Seneca Center for Children and Families, established in 1985 and based in San Leandro, focuses on children and youth with mental health problems. At the Building Blocks Therapeutic Preschool in Oakland, about half of the children ages 2 1/2 to 5 are in foster care. All had been asked to leave other preschools because of behavioral problems.

"We work with the most profoundly struggling kids," said Ken Berrick, Seneca's executive director. "One of our kids was found on a floor, alone in his apartment. He had eaten the dog's food and had been drinking the dog's water. These are kids who don't know whether they will be hugged or hit. These are toddlers who are left alone and go from room to room looking for a mom or dad and no one is there. That leaves profound effects."

Walking around the playground last week, Berrick talked of foster children who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and have "a vacant look" as they retreat into an interior world that feels safe. There are children who learned flight, he said, but more children learn to fight. There are foster children who so want to attach themselves to an adult that they run to hug the legs of any stranger who appears on the playground.

The First Place for Youth catches foster kids as they exit the system, helping them

transition from foster care to housing, counseling and academic programs.

Executive Director Sam Cobbs said while there is great momentum around foster care reform, huge gaps in services remain.

"As we're addressing housing, we need to take a look at education," he said. "Five percent of young people who graduate from foster care end up going to college. Of those 5 percent, only 3 percent end up graduating. If we're going to begin to change these drastic outcomes, we need to focus on more funding for these kids to get to college and have the resources to stay there."

California Youth Connection, another nonprofit with chapters across the Bay Area, enlists current and former foster youth to advocate for policy change and legislative reform.

Jonathan Pearson, who as a boy was abused by his father and ended up in foster care at age 12, now serves as a legislative and policy coordinator for the California Youth Connection.

"I was sent into foster care because of abuse and neglect by my father," said Pearson, now 25. "It's something no child should ever have to go through."

Kristal McCoy, who became a ward of the court at age 13 when her great-grandmother was no longer able to care for her, is now 22 and a recent graduate of Cal State Hayward (now called Cal State East Bay).

She says she had help from key individuals, including her great-grandmother, a social worker and the people she met at the California Youth Connection.

"Housing is the big thing that foster youth need," she said. "But they also need job skills to support the housing. They need educational skills to support the job skills."

"There is definitely a stigma to being a foster youth," she said. "People seem to think it's the youth's fault that they're in foster care and if you're in foster care you must be bad. I'm not ashamed that I was a foster youth. But I don't identify myself as a foster youth. I am Kristal McCoy."

She added, "My great-grandmother always told me, 'It's not what's around you that's important. It's what's in you.' "

McCoy is now applying to law school.

Jasmenda Brown was placed in foster care in Oakland at age 5. Her mother was a drug addict and her father was never in the

picture. She was cared for by her grandmother until she was kicked out at age 15. She was homeless for more than a year, until she found First Place for Youth, where she was directed to housing and other supportive services.

"I didn't know how to take care of myself," Brown said. "I didn't know how to work, how to pay bills, how to pay rent, how to budget. When I turned 18, I was supposed to be an adult. But I didn't have the mentality of an adult."

Now 20, Brown is studying to become a dental assistant. She has reunited with her mother, who has been drug-free for five years. Brown recently found out she was pregnant.

"I couldn't put my child up for adoption," Brown said. "I don't want my daughter to say, 'Who is my mom and why am I in this situation?' When she gets older, I'll tell her the real world is really hard. But I'll never kick her out of the house. I'll never do anything to have her taken from me."

## **Bills awaiting governor's action**

-- AB1331, Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa. Ensures SSI for youth exiting foster care with serious physical or mental disability.

-- AB3340, Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley. Requires CDSS to establish a unified process for licensing foster family homes.

-- AB149, Karen Bass, D-Baldwin Vista (L.A. County) Requires CDSS to invest in technology to locate family members.

-- AB402, Fiona Ma, D-San Francisco. Changes tax law to allow foster youth to inherit property.

-- AB1453, Nell Soto, D-Pomona (L.A. County) Requires CDSS to develop a plan to reform the current group care foster system to a system of residentially based services.

-- AB277, Soto. Increases foster parent training from 8 to 12 hours annually, and requires that the training include information about the court system.

-- SB785, Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento. Requires CDSS to improve access to mental health services for foster children living outside their county of origin.

-- SB39, Carole Migden, D-San Francisco. Increase public access to information about foster facilities.

-- SB241, Sheila Kuehl, D-Santa Monica. Requires counties pay for legal costs that cannot be paid by parents at probate proceedings.