

NO REFUGE: A way home for foster youth

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THE MOMENT a child is taken from his or her home and placed in foster care, the state's mandate is to either reunify the child with their family, or find him or her a permanent home through adoption.

If that foster youth reaches 18 and emancipates from the system without either, the state has failed them.

Each year, the state fails approximately 5,000 foster youth, who, once they turn 18, are no longer eligible for foster-care services such as housing. During this pivotal time, many of these youth find themselves with no place to live, and no one to turn to.

In 2001, the California Legislature passed the Transitional Housing program for Emancipated Youth (known as THP-Plus) to address this problem. This was to be the only state-funded program that would provide the much-needed housing and support for transitioning youth.

Under the program, which is limited to two years, emancipated youth pay rent with gradually decreasing subsidies, and receive grocery vouchers, and educational and vocational skills -- all of which help with their independent-living skills.

But, like many foster-care services in the state, it fell far short of what was promised.

What was originally going to be a fully state-funded program, evolved into legislation that required county governments to provide a 60 percent match, making it nearly impossible for most counties to participate.

As a result, only three counties -- San Francisco, Alameda and Contra Costa -- have elected to participate, while emancipating youth in the remaining 55 counties are still left to fend for themselves.

"Clearly, the current sharing ratio is a barrier for counties to participate," said Frank Mecca, executive director of the County Welfare Directors Association.

"Counties already put in \$100 million of their own money, which is above and beyond what the state requires. We're overextended in augmenting the current state funding -- a 60 percent sharing ratio for a new service just made it impossible."

Like many other foster-care programs, some counties aren't even aware the state funds exist -- and, if they are, how to access them.

"Counties really aren't aware of how to make use of this funding stream," said Miriam Krinsky, executive director of the Children Law Center in Los Angeles. "It would be invaluable if the state were able to provide training, even if it's just assistance in filling out paperwork, and focus on outreach to counties to make them aware of the fund."

With more youth aging out of the system this year than any other period of time, the need for transitional housing and services is dire. Alameda County is expected to have 335 youth emancipating this year, according to a January report by the Corporation for Supportive Housing. It only has 133 units available.

Contra Costa County is projected to have 181 emancipating youth, 118 of whom will need housing.

According to San Francisco's Human Services Agency, San Francisco is expected to have 150 youth age out of the system -- about one-third of whom will need housing.

Recognizing this growing crisis, a number of youth advocates have come together to push for the expansion of the program, including former state Senate President Pro Tem John Burton, whose John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes has been funding programs for homeless children.

"I've gotten involved in this issue because, despite many good intentions, the foster-care system isn't working," he said. "Two-thirds of all kids who leave foster care become homeless and many others end up in the Youth Authority. Foster care is the government's job and with good policy these outcomes can be improved. The aim of my foundation is to make these improvements, and help foster kids have a safe and productive future."

Burton enlisted the help of Amy Lemley, whose Oakland-based First Place Fund put up matching funds on behalf of Alameda County and drew \$115,000 from the state program last year.

"By expanding this important program, we can give these young people a real chance and help them avoid the costly negative outcomes that too frequently coincide with foster-care involvement, such as homelessness, unemployment, and incarceration," she said.

State funding would also free up county dollars that have been used in the required match, said Trent Rhorer, San Francisco's Human Services Director. Currently, San Francisco pays \$500,000 to get the state's 40 percent match of approximately \$300,000.

"If the state took over the \$500,000, we could expand our current portfolio beyond the 31 housing units," he said. "We could also use the funds to keep kids out of care from the front-end, and get them out of group homes and into relatives' homes. We could hire additional staff. Currently, child welfare workers have about 36 to 37 caseloads."

With Burton and Lemley's backing, a bill authored by Kevin Murray, D-Los Angeles, would make THP-Plus a fully-funded state program, thus creating more consistency throughout the counties.

The bill needs all the support it can get, given the state's track record on foster care.

"Through support programs for transitioning foster youth, the Schwarzenegger administration is providing resources that help these young adults achieve self-sufficiency and succeed on their own," said Cliff Allenby, director, California Department of Social Services.

But with 65 percent of the state's emancipating youth in need of housing, the administration is clearly not doing enough.

The state has already failed in its obligation to find these foster youth homes while they were in the system. The least it can do is provide them the time and support to find their own way home.