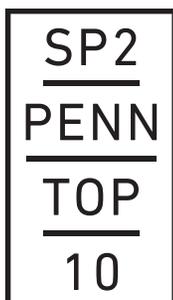


**STRUGGLING AND ALONE: THE LIFE OF YOUNG
ADULTS AGED OUT OF FOSTER CARE**

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What happens to young adults who exit foster care after turning 21 in our current care model? In the absence of familial support and concrete resources typically afforded to young people in the general population, many youth aging out of foster care end up dependent on the only “support” structures available to them: our criminal justice system, welfare, low-income housing, and mental and behavioral health programs.

Our system of foster care fails young adults who are approaching the age of 21 when they are forced to live independently. In other words, they are expected to exit care and live self-sufficiently, relying on themselves for survival. Many experience this stark reality after having been dependent on foster families since their early teens or younger; after having possibly lived in a group home until they were 18; after being moved to a state-funded apartment at 18 with classes as their only preparation to obtain the daily living skills needed to survive on their own. At 21, the state no longer provides them housing and no longer funds their education. Many are left without income, without a home and without the family support that 21-year-olds who have not been in foster care benefit from. Independent living does not work. It does not prepare these young people for a successful transition to adulthood; a new approach is needed.

THE CHALLENGE OF OUR CURRENT TIMES

Guiding young adults towards independent living is a model grounded in an economic and social environment that no longer exists. In the 1960s, it was likely that young adults in their mid-20s lived self-sufficiently. They were most likely married, earning a livable wage (even without a college degree) and starting a family.

Today, conditions are much different. Young adults in their mid-20s most likely still live at home with their parents, with almost half of this group unemployed. Without a college degree, there is a 25% chance someone in their mid-20s will live in poverty. Even among the most motivated, hard-working young adults, our current economy doesn't permit the majority of them to obtain livable wages, purchase affordable housing or support a family.

The passage into "adulthood," with its financial and familial independence, is getting delayed today until late 20s or even early 30s. If young adults with supportive family relationships cannot function independently in their early 20s, how can young adults who have experienced trauma, instability, social isolation and poverty for most of their lives be expected to do it?

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

- For every young adult who ages out of foster care, taxpayers pay an estimated \$300,000 in social services during their lifetime.
- 26,000 young adults age out of foster care annually.
- 29% of young adults aging out of foster care have inconsistent access to food.
- Most young adults aging out of foster care rely on needs-based government help, like food stamps, to survive.

LIFE AS A TWENTY-SOMETHING

IN THE 1960s...

- Financially self-sufficient
- Married
- Homeowner
- Making a living wage without a college degree

TODAY...

- Living with parents
- Possibly unemployed
- 25% chance of living in poverty without a college degree
- Earning 60% more than peers if they have a college degree

TODAY, AFTER FOSTER CARE...

- Living alone
- 37% chance of having experienced homelessness
- 5% chance of earning a 2- or 4- year college degree
- Living in poverty

CHANGING THE WAY

We are making a plea to rethink how we handle young adults aging out of foster care. Instead of striving towards independent living, a new model needs to be introduced that provides programs that promote interdependent living. In this model, young adults form close relationships with older adults and receive support from them. Support can include emotional, informational, financial, housing or material. Similar to young people in the general population who rely on their families for support late into their 20s, young people formerly in foster care may experience improved lives if they have strong social support networks, including the presence of at least one caring, committed adult.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

VOLUNTEER

If you know a young person in foster care, reach out to him/her as a caring adult in his/her life. You just might change a life.

CONTACT YOUR REPRESENTATIVE

Reach out to your representative or senator to share your thoughts on the need for new federal legislation that would mandate interdependent living services replace current independent living services. Each year since 2002, attempts to pass a Foster Care Mentoring Act have failed in Congress. Federal money needs to be directed towards interdependent living programs.

AN EMERGING EXAMPLE

Caring Adults 'R' Everywhere (C.A.R.E.) is a 12-week natural mentoring intervention program designed to support interdependence among older youth at risk of aging out of foster care. Developed at the University of Pennsylvania, the program includes a Master's level trained interventionist who helps youth identify adults in their lives who could serve as natural mentors. Once the adults are identified, screened and approved, they receive natural mentor training. The training includes information about adolescent human development, the impact of trauma on development, effective strategies for mentoring and mentor self-care.

During the heart of the intervention, the interventionist meets with the youth and natural mentor each week to support the development of their relationship. The pair also spends intentional, weekly time in their community to work on life skills development in a more natural context. For example, rather than learning about meal preparation in a classroom, the youth and natural mentor develop a grocery list and budget, shop, prepare the meal, and enjoy food and conversation together. There are also large-group activities designed to provide a community of support among the youth and the natural mentors.

Booster sessions, or aftercare, are available as needed after the completion of the 12-week intervention. C.A.R.E. is currently being piloted in partnership with the City of Philadelphia's Department of Human Services.