

Our foster youth need support until age 21

By John Burton

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For most young people, graduating from high school marks an important step forward in their life as young adults. For Sara, an 18-year-old in California's foster-care system, it resulted in a step back into her abusive past.

As a recent high school graduate, Sara was no longer eligible for foster care and stopped receiving the food, shelter and supportive services it had provided since she entered foster care at age 8. With no options available, Sara did what many youth who "age out" of foster care do: She returned to her family - the very family from which she was originally removed due to abuse and neglect.

In Sara's case, that meant moving back to her mother's East Oakland apartment, where her mother's heroin addiction was supported by a steady stream of paying customers and prostitution. Sara was locked out of the apartment for hours at a time and often returned to find that her few personal possessions had been stolen and sold. She worried about her personal safety and found it hard to sleep at night.

Her dreams of higher education were put on hold as she struggled to make it through each day. After several months living in this dangerous and chaotic environment, Sara decided she had to get out, thinking being homeless was better than being dead.

Sadly, Sara is not alone.

If fact, the number of youth who "age out" or "emancipate" from foster care is at an all time high, according to the Pew Charitable Trusts' Kids Are Waiting campaign, with 25,000 youth emancipating in 2005, up 41 percent since 1998. Here in California, more than 4,000 "age out" annually, a figure, which according to University of California at Berkeley's Center for Social Services Research, has matched national trends, growing 40 percent since 1998.

Like Sara, these young people face an uphill battle once they leave the foster-care system. According to research conducted by Professor Mark Courtney of the University of Washington, youth who left foster care by age 18 were nearly three times more likely than their peers to be out of work and school. They were twice as likely to be unable to pay their rent and were four times as likely to be evicted. Nearly half of the young women had been pregnant at least once by age 19. Significant numbers were incarcerated or homeless at some point.

In an effort to prevent these costly outcomes and give young people such as Sara a chance, several states have implemented a common-sense solution: extending foster care eligibility to age 21. California should do the same.

But there's an obstacle. Up to age 18, the federal government pays approximately 50 percent of all foster-care costs in California. After that, they stop contributing. Without the federal government's share, most states decide it's just too expensive to extend foster care for three more years, leaving children out on their own.

U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., wants to change that. She has introduced legislation (S1512) that would offer states the option of providing foster care to older youth by extending federal funding to age 21. Organizations from around the country are signing on to support her proposal, including the American Bar Association, which will adopt a resolution to expand support for older youth in foster care at its annual conference held this week in San Francisco.

Three years may not seem as if it's a long time, but studies have found that it makes a world of difference. A 2005 report by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago found that youth who are allowed to remain in foster care beyond age 18 were 200 percent more likely to be working toward completion of a high school diploma and 300 percent more likely to be in college than youth who left foster care at age 18. They were also more likely to be insured, have better mental health and far less likely to be victims or perpetrators of crime and violence.

Supporting foster care until age 21 is particularly important in terms of preventing crime and reducing the expense of incarceration. A 2007 study from the University of Chicago concluded that both male and female former foster youth are ten times more likely to be arrested since age 18 than youth of the same age, race and sex. According to the California Budget Project, the associated costs of these arrests and incarcerations are considerable, with the per capita cost of adult incarceration in California in 2006 reaching \$43,287 annually.

Given the crisis in the California prison system, supporting foster youth until age 21 is one practical way to stem the flow of youth into the adult correction system.

Expanding support for youth in foster care until age 21 also reflects a growing demographic trend: longer-term support of young adults is a fact of American life. How many parents today cut off their child entirely at age 18? Not many, according to the Pew Research Center, which found that more than half of adult children receive an average of \$3,410 annually from their parents until age 40. Studies by the University of Michigan and the University of Chicago show the same thing, particularly during the early years of young adulthood through age 26. We've all heard about the phenomenon of "boomerang kids," adult children who move back in with the parents in their 20s and 30s.

It's hard enough to make it on your own these days, especially as an 18-year-old in the Bay Area. We don't cut off our own kids at that age, and the foster-care system shouldn't do it, either. These young adults are in foster care through no fault of their own. We owe it to them, and to Californians who foot the bill for more prisons, to make the best decisions in their interest. Sen. Boxer's proposal to expand foster care until age 21 makes perfect sense and is the right thing to do.

John Burton, former president pro tem of the state Senate, now chairs the John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes.

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