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Needed -- a safety net

By John Burton

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Sophia has never had it easy. From the time she was born with sickle cell anemia to the time she was placed into foster care at age 8, after being chronically neglected by her drug-addicted mother, Sophia had her share of troubles and a few more.

Things didn't get better for Sophia as she got older.

Her many placements in foster care prevented Sophia from receiving the consistent medical care she needed to manage her illness. By the time she was ready to "age out" of foster care at age 18, she regularly experienced the painful attacks that characterize sickle cell, requiring hospitalization, pain medication and many lost days of school. Despite her disability, Sophia left California's foster-care system when she turned 18 with nowhere to live, no source of income and nowhere to turn for help.

Sadly, there was help for Sophia -- she just didn't know about it.

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a federal income supplement program that assists our nation's most vulnerable: disabled children and adults with limited income. SSI provides a monthly cash benefit and qualifies them for a range of supportive services, such as affordable housing and expanded access to health services -- services that would have made all the difference to Sophia. Despite their eligibility for SSI, youth such as Sophia often fall through the cracks of the child-welfare system and exit foster care without SSI in place. In California, children and youth in foster care are not systematically screened for physical or mental disabilities.

Sophia is not the only youth in foster care who faces this predicament. A February 2007 report issued by a California Department of Social Services workgroup estimates that 15 percent of California's children and youth in foster care suffer from a serious mental or physical disability. These disabilities aren't mild depression or even post-traumatic stress disorder. As with Sophia, the disabilities experienced by many foster youth are often permanent, and include physical disabilities such as sickle

cell or mental-health disorders as serious as schizophrenia.

Legislation under consideration in Sacramento would ensure that youth with disabilities aren't left to fend for themselves. Assembly Bill 1331, authored by Assembly member Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa, would require county child welfare agencies to screen all youth at age 16 for a mental or physical disability and apply for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for those who are likely to qualify.

AB1331 would also allow youth whose SSI applications are being processed to remain in foster care until a final decision regarding their application has been made. This aspect of the proposal is essential, as youth who exit foster care with an SSI application pending quickly join the ranks of the homeless and cannot be notified about additional paperwork requirements or certification meetings.

Finally, the legislation will create a modest savings account for youth with disabilities, so that when they exit care with SSI, they have enough money to secure basic necessities, such as a place to live and food.

Creating a safety net for disabled youth exiting foster care would cost the state of California less than \$2 million annually. With a state budget of more than \$103 billion, this cost is negligible. The cost of continuing on our current course, however, is considerable. A study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Mental Health Policy and Services Research found that homelessness among mentally ill people imposes a startlingly high cost to taxpayers. On average, these individuals utilize \$40,500 worth of publicly funded services every year.

Cost issues aside, however, this issue raises fundamental questions about the value we place on children, particularly those with disabilities. How can a society sit back and allow young people with a serious mental or physical disability leave the foster-care system, knowing that they have no resources or support to assist them? Would those of us with children ever consider such a course of action for our own children?

Even the most hardened cynic must look at our practice and know that it is wrong.

Fortunately, we have the opportunity to make things right. AB1331 cleared its first legislative hurdle March 27, passing the Assembly Human Services Committee with bipartisan support. Now it will move on to the Assembly Appropriations Committee and it is hoped thereafter onto the Senate and ultimately onto Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's desk for his signature.

Each step along the way, we must maintain our resolve to treat California's disabled foster children as though they were our own. It may be too late for Sophia, but there are many more foster youth with disabilities who will benefit from the safety net SSI can provide.

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