

Recommendations for Reducing Homelessness in the Aging Out Population of Young Adults
Involved in the Foster Care System

Approved: Dr. Nancy R. Gartner

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Kimberlee M. Weisskopf

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I was emancipated at the age of 17 in 1982 without any resources. Today, I am 58 years old. My academic journey began with my GED, I then went on to Los Medanos community college, then on to Diablo Valley College, another community college, then on to California State University East Bay to receive a bachelor's in psychology, and here I am now about to earn my master's in criminal justice from the University of Wisconsin – Platteville. The odds have been against me for decades, but yet I persevere with extreme resiliency.

These children must not become society's throwaways, child welfare agencies must be held accountable, and that I believe is my final recommendation.

Abstract

This paper explores the topic of homelessness within the aging out population of young adults in the foster care system and how as a society, the numbers of individuals of this vulnerable population can be reduced. This paper will provide recommendations on how this homeless population can be reduced, but also how society can better serve these young adults with much needed additional resources, including mental and physical health care, education, life skills, substance abuse treatment (if needed), financial guidance, and mentorship from a trusting adult.

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Foster care – a temporary shelter for children under the age of 18 and in some states up to 21, whose parents are not capable of taking care of them. Their living situation has been made known to a child welfare agency. The shelter can be with a foster family, in a group home, in an institution, or with a relative, known as kinship care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014).

Aging out is “the termination of court jurisdiction over foster youths” (US Department of Education, 2016). According to Ahmann & Dokken (2017) there are approximately 428,000 children in the foster care system within the United States, and of those 428,000 children, 29,000 of these children will age out annually, upon their 18th birthday. These children enter the foster care system under traumatic circumstances, and the majority of children who are aging out of the system entered the system in their adolescent years, at an average age of 14. On average, these children will live in eight different homes or placements (Stott, 2011). Of the 29,000 children aging out, 20% will immediately become homeless (Department of Health and Human Services, 2012), seven out of ten females will become pregnant by the time they are 21 years old, and 25 percent of aging out young adults will become incarcerated within two years (National Fostering Youth Institute, 2022).

Without a roof over their heads many of these children will turn to extremely risky behaviors such as substance abuse, theft, robbery, and prostitution which in turn results in unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted disease, involvement within the criminal justice system, higher risk of commission of suicide, gang involvement, and early death.

There are programs available to help these children find and keep affordable housing.

On July 29, 2019, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced the Fostering Youth Independence (FYI) program. FYI allows former foster children who are homeless or who are at risk of being homeless the opportunity to receive low cost housing for up to 36 months through their local Public Housing Authority (PHA) (Ray, 2021). Since the creation of FYI only 822 individuals in 31 states have taken advantage of this benefit during the two years since its implementation and the time of Ray's writing (Ray, 2021). Only 4,600 homes are needed annually to eradicate the homelessness of aging out foster children. Research will show affordable housing is attainable for every foster child aging out of the system.

Along with a lack of housing many of these young adults lack positive role models, they have or are experiencing mental health issues, they are undereducated, they have little to no savings, and they have very poor living skills. In addition to affordable housing for this vulnerable population there is also a great need for mentorship, financial guidance, and educational assistance, which is attainable from our society (Katz & Courtney, 2015).

The current study utilizes secondary research. The recommendations made in this paper are important for many reasons to both current and future policy making and policymakers, social workers, probation, and parole officers. This paper brings attention to the problems of these at-risk youths, and it promotes a solution. Addressing these problems will help to reduce the adult criminal justice population too (because when 25% of this population is incarcerated, they are tried as adults), reduce teen pregnancy, address substance abuse, address mental health issues, help end unemployment, and support youth through public assistance. And society can help molding these at-risk youth into productive adult members of society.

These children enter the system with the hope of reunification with their biological families; and if that is not possible, they hope to find a forever home. Adolescents who enter the

system, a child with a disability, or if a child has been in the foster care system for more than two years find their chances of finding a permanent placement greatly decreased. For these youth, there are increased odds of aging out. Overall, 13% of the children within the foster care system will not achieve permanency and will eventually age out (Lockwood et al., 2015). Permanency is defined as “something permanent”. Permanent is defined as “lasting or intended to last indefinitely without change” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Unfortunately, children who age out will not find that permanency prior to becoming an adult. These children are lacking stability.

On average, 40% of foster children are moved within the first six months of placement, adolescents experience more moves than younger children within the first six months. The system itself is to blame for some of the instability these children endure (Lockwood et al., 2015). According to James (2004) seven out of ten placement changes occur due to the system or procedure and they are either routine or planned. For example, the closing of a group home, a lack of funding, a move from a shelter to short term foster care, a kinship move, or a move to be closer to the biological family or school could all be changes experienced. The majority of children, 94%, encounter a system or policy move. However, almost half, 47% of these children do exhibit behavioral problems (Stott, 2011).

Aged out foster youth have become America’s throw away children, they are yet to find somewhere to call home, some type of permanency, and yet upon their 18th birthday they are disposed of by the same agencies that promised to care for them. This research addresses the homelessness they endure, the lack of resources available to them, and the lack of skills that they have been taught. This paper also explores the many available solutions to these problems. Child welfare agencies must do a better job to prepare these young adults for adulthood. Independent Living Skills (ILP) must be taught, and not through a workbook. These children need mentors,

financial skills, therapy, literacy, computer skills, resume and cover letter skills, and skills on how to maintain a home, cook, clean, and budget prior to aging out. Many of these young adults are leaving the system entrusted to care for them without identification, without a social security card, and without a birth certificate. If the child welfare agencies cannot do better to prepare them, then society must do a better job after they age out.

Literature Review

In 1853, the Children's Aid Society was founded in New York, NY by minister Charles Loring Brace. Brace observed the number of immigrant children living in the streets of New York city. The society initiated the Orphan Train Movement, where 150,000 homeless and parentless children were loaded on trains heading to the Midwest states where they were to be adopted by families to work on the family farms. Many of the children became indentured to their new families, some children were abused, while others found a loving home. Brace's Orphan Train Movement became the basis for the foster care system in the United States (Sabini, 2017).

Foster care, when a child's parents are no longer able to care for their child/children, child welfare services intervene and removes the child/children from the home to give the child 24 hour care, safety, and stable housing. A child can be placed in a foster home, kinship care, a group home, an emergency shelter, or an institution (Code of Federal Regulations, 2016).

In 1912, the federal Children's Bureau was created by Congress. The Children's Bureau was required to "investigate and report. . . upon all matters pertaining to the welfare of children and child life among all classes of our people" (Child Welfare, n.d.). The Children's Bureau was not created for abused or neglected children, because abuse and neglect among children was socially acceptable in 1912. The Children's Bureau was created to end child labor and reduce the

infant mortality rate. It was not until 1935, and the passage of the original Social Security Act, that provisions were made for neglected, dependent, homeless children, and children likely to become delinquent. States were to receive federal funding to extend, establish, and strengthen public welfare agencies (Child Welfare, n.d.).

When a child enters foster care, regardless of age, they are taken away from the only family they have ever known. It is a very traumatic experience. Younger children seem to fare better within the system, they have a sense of resiliency that comes with the naivete of youth, and younger children within the system are wanted by more foster parents than children of an adolescent age. Entering the foster care system as an adolescent is more than traumatic, it is terrifying along with a sense of loneliness, neglect, and abandonment that is difficult to describe. An adolescent entering the system has not only lost the only family they know, but they have also lost their school, friends, and any support system they may have had. They enter a home that is not theirs as a complete stranger and are expected to act and react like other members of the family. These youth are expected to fit in with this nuclear family and they don't know how; they have a sense of not belonging that can be very difficult to overcome. The adolescent also brings with them the emotional baggage of living in an unhealthy environment, parents who are substance users and abusers, abuse – emotional, physical, and/or sexual, neglect, experiences that make children grow up before their time, because they have had to, to survive. These kids are survivors, and they are used to living in survival mode, not family mode. Society must emphasize the living not those surviving (Katz & Courtney, 2015).

In 2021, over 50,000 children aged 12 to 17 entered the foster care system comprising 25% of all children who enter the system in 2021 (The AFCARS Report, 2022). Of those 50,000 individuals, 29,000 will age out between their 18th and 21st birthday. Evidence about young

adults aging out of the foster care system over the past 30 years confirms this vulnerable population is in great need of improved programs to better serve them.

Foster children who age out of the system do not fare as well as their peers from biological families. Katz & Courtney (2015) conducted a three wave study to determine the unmet needs of foster children who had aged out of the system. The baseline was 17 and 18 year olds still in foster care, the second wave occurred two years later, and the third wave occurred two years after the second wave. The number one unmet need identified was financial education at 10.3%, with a distinct need for budgeting, using a checkbook, a debit and credit card, balancing a checking account, comparison shopping, and financial goal setting, 8% of respondents identified a need for housing. Four years after the study began and none of the participants were in foster care, the need for financial education was at 14% and housing at 7.6%. Housing was the only to area to show a decreased need, health, finance, employment, education, relationships all showed increases. According to Geenen & Powers (2007) foster children who have aged out are not looking for text or workbook living skills, they are looking for a more self-directed means of learning the living skills required of them to become self-supporting, responsible adults.

When a young person starts adulthood at such a disadvantage it is extremely difficult to “catch up”. Only 30.7% of aged out youth have a high school diploma while 9.4% have a GED, 4.4% have a two year college degree, and 2.5% have a four year degree. In the area of physical and mental health, the numbers do not get much better. Approximately 16% describe their physical health as fair and over 54% had at least one mental health issue (which includes depression, social phobia, post-traumatic stress disorder, and panic disorder) (Fernandes-Alcantra, 2012). There are feasible solutions for these young adults.

According to Dworsky & Courtney (2009) parents of children aged 18 to 34 spend \$38,000 to help support their adult children in the areas of housing, food, cash assistance, and education. This is a sobering contrast to today's aging out foster population. Jones (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of 16 foster children who aged out. The baseline for the study was six months, the second wave was one year, the third wave two years, and the fourth wave was at three years after aging out. What stood this study apart from the rest is that the focus was on educational goals these children had after being out of foster care and living independently for six months, with 75 – 80% of the children studied stating they wished to attend college. So many of these children wish to obtain a higher education but lack any knowledge or resources on how to meet that goal. These youth earn an average of \$5000, compared to the average student's mean income, \$39,000. And these children leaving the foster care system do not have the option of familial support in case of a crisis.

Today, in the US, 26 is the average age of financial independence and yet society expects 18 to 21 year olds who have aged out of the child welfare system to be just that, financially independent (Krinsky, 2010). This is the expectation for children who have been abused physically, emotionally and/or sexually, who have been neglected, who were brought into this world by parents who may have been substance abusers who have possibly been abused and neglected themselves. The cycle must be stopped. These children enter the child welfare system looking for guidance, protection, love, respect, and trust; yet society sends them out into society very ill prepared and alone. Only one-third of children who have aged out will have a driver's license, 40% will have \$250 on hand, and one quarter do not have the tools necessary to set up a home, if they have a home (Krinsky, 2010).

In Los Angeles, County, California there are approximately 2,400 children in extended foster care aged 18 – 21 as of April 2023. California is one of the states that allow foster children to remain in care until they are 21. Unfortunately, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (LADCF) is providing abysmal care for these children. On August 23, 2023, a class-action lawsuit was filed in the U.S. District Court against LADCF, the California Department of Social Services, California Health and Human Services Agency, Los Angeles County, and the Los Angeles County of Mental Health (defendants) by the public-interest law firms Children’s Rights and Public Counsel and the Alliance for Children’s Rights on behalf of six transition aged foster children (plaintiffs). The plaintiffs filed the lawsuit on behalf of a specific subclass of transition aged foster children and on behalf of a punitive class.

This lawsuit alleges the defendants failed to provide minimally adequate, safe, and stable housing which in turn results in the transitional youth to become homeless. They have failed at placement options for the transitional youth which are inadequate and scarce, the defendants have failed to meet their legal obligations to transitioning age foster children. The need to evaluate and increase the number of placements has been deliberately ignored. The defendants must have a system in place to ensure transitional youth receive individual planning for their transition into adulthood. The defendants have deprived the transitioning youth their right to due process, have violated the right of family association, and the defendants are denying the right of adequate and necessary behavioral health services (*Ocean et al. v. LA County et al.*, 2023).

Plaintiff, Erykha B, she’s a 19 year old from Los Angeles, CA. She is the youngest of eight children and was born shortly after her siblings had been removed from their parents’ home. She has spent her entire life in the foster care system and the off and on again reunification efforts with her mother. Despite the trauma she has endured, at least five different

foster homes within eight years, an attempted sexual assault in her last foster home, and being placed with only one of her siblings and difficulties with visits with her other siblings, she has managed to graduate from high school. Erykha became homeless after her last foster home. Her and a girlfriend were homeless for two weeks, with LADCF's knowledge and without providing her with any assistance. Shortly thereafter, Erykha interviewed for a Transitional Housing Placement Program for Nonminor Dependents (THPP-NMD) without any support from LADCF. When she was accepted into the program, LADCF failed to inform her of her admission for several weeks, at which time the program no longer had a spot for her. Erykha has never had any kind of support system and when she began displaying behavioral symptoms there was no one to recognize them as the effects of the trauma she had endured. It was LADCF's decision to blame her for her behavioral problems, they stated that her problems were due to her lack of interest in the trauma-responsive techniques they treated her with, and she was lacking training (*Ocean et al. v. LA County et al.*, 2023).

Another plaintiff, Rosie S. has been in foster care since she was eight years old, she is now 20 and pregnant with her first child, and she is hoping for a career in child advocacy. Rosie is now residing in the state of Nevada in a Supervised Independent Living Setting (SILP) since LADCF did not provide her with housing. An SILP is an alternative housing for youth in transition which the nonminor dependent (NMD) finds the home and remains eligible for assistance and resources through the local child welfare office (CASA of Los Angeles, n.d.). Rosie had a friend in Nevada who was approved for an SILP. Rosie has been eligible and enrolled in Medicaid her entire life; however, when LADCF failed to transfer her Medicaid with her to the SILP placement, Rosie received no medical care for the first six months of her pregnancy (*Ocean et al. v. LA County, et al.*, 2023).

Jackson K., another plaintiff is a 19 year old whose primary language is American Sign Language (ASL). Jackson's biological mother was sent to prison in 2007, and he entered the foster care system. He was adopted in 2009 and his adoptive mother was the only member of the family to learn ASL, unfortunately she passed away when Jackson was only nine years old, and she was his only support system. In early 2022, his adoptive father kicked him out of the house. After leaving his home he stayed in a motel for a few weeks until he ran out of money, he was forced to quit school in his last semester of high school, and he lived in shelters for two months before his request to re-enter the foster care system was court approved. Upon re-entry to extended foster care, LADCF failed to provide him with an ASL interpreter. In May of 2022 Jackson was moved to an LADCF contracted hotel where he felt unsafe. He soon fell victim to online bullying, when he called the police to report the bullying he was once again failed because there wasn't an ASL interpreter available, and he was mistakenly sent to a psychiatric hospital without explanation. Jackson was eventually placed in a transitional living program where he felt safe, then a resident of the program called for a fake welfare check which resulted in Jackson being tackled by a police officer because of a lack of an ASL interpreter. LADCF failed this child miserably and repeatedly by violating his civil right of due process and extremely inadequate support services especially in regard to an ASL interpreter, which in turn created much more trauma in this young man's life (*Ocean et al., v. LA County et al., 2023*).

There are many more children with very similar stories of neglect and abuse within a system whose primary responsibility is to take care of them. The agencies that are listed as defendants in this case all accept federal funds and by accepting those funds, they are bound to provide safe, stable housing, continuance of Medicaid coverage to cover both physical and

mental health, and the independent living skills needed to navigate these youth not only the transition from foster care, but also the skills needed to navigate adulthood.

The young adults who are aging out of foster care are lacking in many ways. There will never be a “one size fits all” solution. Solutions need to be tailored to the individual’s needs. Yes, it is a tall order, but one that can be accomplished. Since 1985 aged out foster youth have been eligible for Medicaid insurance under the COBRA act, which also offers mental health coverage (Doucet et al., 2022). Under the Fostering Youth Independence (FYI) program available through HUD, they have housing assistance (Ray, 2021). What is lacking is attachment, commitment, belief, and involvement (Hirschi, 1969). This is a population that has lacked these four fundamentals for most, if not all of their lives. They have been uprooted and moved around much more than an adolescent within a biological family. The majority of them are also in great need of mental health counseling and mentorship. Society can decrease the number of homeless aged out young adults through hands on programs.

Today’s aged out youth are very ill prepared for the challenges of adult life. Many do not have any familial support, they do not know how to manage a bank account, they have very little, if any knowledge of credit cards and credit scores, they do not know how to drive a vehicle, and only about 40% have a high school education. Many young adults today are increasingly depending on their families for financial support and those that have families that can provide that support are more likely to attend college, they are also more likely to live at home after they turn 18 or 21 (Cusick et al., 2012). Unfortunately, for adolescents aging out of the system the policies, programs, and social institutions have not adequately responded to their changing needs.

Methods

Several databases were used to complete the current research, including Elsevier, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, the Department of Health and Human Services, MINDS, and included articles from peer reviewed journals, reputable websites, and news articles. This allowed for a qualitative, secondary data analysis of previous research on the topic of how to reduce the number of aging out foster children who experience homelessness. Keywords used to search the databases including adolescent foster children, aging out, emancipation, transitional housing, and independent living skills.

Results

Foster children are society's children, and yet society, and the agencies that have been entrusted to care for them, are failing them. They are being sent into adulthood with little to no financial resources and assistance; they often become homeless or become couch surfers; they have minimal education; they often are underemployed; they have been shuffled within a system that has failed to give them permanency; and yet, the expectation is that they become mature, stable, self-supporting adults on their 18th or 21st birthday. These children will spend the majority of their adult lives striving for the American dream and very few will achieve it. Of the 29,000 children that age out annually 20% will immediately become homeless, 25% will be incarcerated within two years, seven out of ten females will become a parent before their 21st birthday, and less than 50% will have graduated from high school (Ahmann & Dokken, 2017; National Foster Youth Institute, 2022).

Greeson et al., (2015) performed a study with 17 foster children, ages ranging from 17-21 that were attending a charter high school with only foster children in attendance. They were hoping to create a welfare based mentoring program, Caring Adults "R" Everywhere (CARE).

Most of the students acknowledged the need and a desire for a positive adult relationship, unfortunately some have never experienced such a relationship. The program is run by an interventionist, with a master's degree in social work who meets with the mentee on a weekly basis for two hours where they can discuss anything such as life skills, education goals, or they can take a field trip. One of the negatives of CARE is that it is only a 12 week program, and these young adults need long term, sustainable relationships, which they've never had (Greeson et al., 2015).

One of the programs that has shown to be a success is the Real Alternatives for Adolescents (RAFA) located in Hayward, CA it was created in 2003 by the Bay Area Youth Centers (BAYC). There are two tiers within the RAFA program, tier one, Transitional Housing Placement (THP), is for 16-17 year olds that are in the child welfare system and for those who are on probation. Tier one participants live in one fourplex apartment building with on-site supervision. Tier two, THP+ is for 18-21 year olds who live in scattered-site housing. Both tiers are not charged monthly rent, they have access to crisis and emergency support 24/7, educational support, job-skill training, internships, and job development workshops, mentoring and training that teaches banking, paying bills, cooking, relationship building with family, friends, roommates, supervisors, and landlords. Each resident receives an allotted stipend every month to teach them how to budget for groceries, transportation, clothing, etc. All participants must work, go to school, or volunteer at least ten hours a week and attend weekly community meetings (Lenz-Rashid, 2018).

In 2013, a five year longitudinal study compared the efficacy of the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of former Foster Youth (Midwest Study) to the efficacy of the RAFA program, the results in the area of parenthood for the RAFA program was only 33% compared to

the Midwest Study of 63%, employment for RAFA was 81% compared the Midwest Study of 46%, and average wages for RAFA was \$16.92 compared to the Midwest Study of \$10.80. This program is located in Alameda County, CA which is a very high rent area. The Midwest Study was conducted in 2004, nine years prior to this study, and the RAFA study neglects to inform the reader if inflation was considered for the increase of wages. Unfortunately, in the areas of stable housing there was only a 2% increase, high school diploma or GED increased by 7%, enrollment in college decreased by 7%, and incarceration increased by 5% (Side by Side Youth, 2013).

According to Rashid (2004) youth in the Avenues to Independence program in San Francisco, CA are asking for Independent Living Skills (ILP) because they are not being provided to them with “hands on” skills, they are being taught ILPs in a classroom setting from workbooks. Programs such as RAFA have shown significant progress. Although Rashid’s sample was only 23, the results were quite promising. All 23 participants were homeless upon arrival, and they had to commit to staying in the program for six months. Only 13% were employed when entering the program, 100% were employed six months later. The program offered a job readiness certification that included a mentor-match, and 13 participants completed the certification all with a higher wage. A six month follow up was conducted with 20 respondents, 18 were either living on their own or with family, only one person was incarcerated, and one person was again homeless. 70% of the participants were able to save \$1100 to \$1800 which was correlated to the length of time stayed in the program and who stayed for the shortest amount of time.

One of the most promising solutions for housing homeless transitional youth is a program called the Youth Transition Project (YTP). It is a program in Wayne County, West Virginia on 166 acres that is building tiny homes for an average cost of \$60,000 for transitioning youth. It is

a program that is introducing the participants to the community and the community to the participants. The parent organization is Stepping Stones and has been in operation for 44 years. They provide residential care to males aged 12 – 17 who can no longer reside with their biological families. Throughout the 38 years of serving these young men the administrator felt as if not enough was being done by the time the boys turned 18 and aged out (Renick, 2020). YTP is partnered with the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Services, it is a public-private partnership. There are three phases to the program. Phase one is a semi-independent, residential program with 24/7 supervision where residents who are not quite ready to live on their own are taught basic life skills. Phase two is supported housing where a resident can live alone in a 500 square foot home of their own which gives them the opportunity to live alone with constant support, but not constant supervision. They have the option of paying \$300 a month and paying their own utilities or paying \$350 a month which includes utilities. In order to pay these bills, the young adults will need to budget and pay themselves. The young men who live in the tiny homes must work, attend school, and/or participate in service-learning activities. Phase three consists of scattered site apartments that are not on-site but only 45 minutes away from Stepping Stones. The residents live in apartments, independently within the community and are given a monthly stipend through the Chaffe Act with very few strings attached. The only requirements are that the youth be employed, a student in a college or trade school at least 40 hours a week, they must have the ability to be independent, and must have been in continuous care for at least six months (Stepping Stones, 2023).

The YTP program offers much more than just housing to these young men. They have a 1,200 square foot greenhouse and hydroponic garden that all residents may take advantage of that offers a certificate in agriculture through a hands on experience related to marketing, selling,

and growing produce. Stepping Stones also offers substance abuse counseling, yoga instruction, music classes, financial literacy, life skills application support, mental health and mental support, community arts & recreation, and food security with the hydroponic garden they grow their food as well as donating any excess to those in need (Stepping Stones, 2023).

Construction on the tiny homes began in March 2020 and was completed in March 2023. Once the request went out to the community, the response was overwhelming. High school students, volunteers, neighbors, and even local inmates helped build the tiny homes. The village consists of 12 tiny homes where residents live alone, pay rent, utilities, must clean up after themselves, shop for their own needs, and take responsibility (Stepping Stones, 2023).

Recommendations

Child welfare agencies have failed our transitional youth population for decades. A solution is long overdue, and unfortunately, there is not just one solution nor are there any quick solutions. However, there are solutions. There needs to be more oversight with the personnel working with these children. In child welfare, social workers have extremely large caseloads, especially in metropolitan areas, and some children are falling through the cracks. And without any oversight for these child welfare agencies there is no accountability.

Age of Foster Care Eligibility

Every state should allow youth in foster care to stay under care until their 23rd birthday. Federal law authorizes states to extend eligibility to youth in transition, only if the state offers foster care to young adults until they are 21. Currently 31 states and the District of Columbia allow youth to remain in care until they are 23. Assembly bill 369, in California is attempting to allow the transitional foster youth within the state to remain under the care of the state until they are 23 years old (Zbur, 2023).

Housing

These children must be housed, without housing they do not have much hope. Having a roof over one's head is more than just keeping warm, having a nice shower, and having a bed to sleep in. Without a home there is no mail, no address, no attachment, no commitment, no belief, and no involvement. And between the ages of 18 to 24, not having these needs met is

frightening. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) created the program Fostering Youth Independence (FYI) in July 2019. Through the program it allows a youth in transition the opportunity to obtain a housing voucher which enables the youth to receive low-cost housing for up to 36 months through a local Public Housing Authority (PHA).

Unfortunately, this program is highly underutilized, in order to be eligible for a housing voucher a transitional youth must contact their child welfare agency, then the child welfare agency contacts the PHA, and then the PHA contacts HUD for the youth. The availability of low-income housing is the largest problem, often there are exceptionally long wait lists, some wait lists are closed, the demand is much greater than the supply which makes programs such as the FYI program very limited (Dworsky, et al., 2012).

From Maine to California the idea of tiny homes is gaining momentum. Building tiny homes for homeless transitional youth is a viable solution. They are an economically sound investment with an average cost of \$50,000, they can be built in three months, they can utilize underused property owned by local, state, and private owners, and they are energy efficient. A tiny house can provide shelter, but transitional youth need much more than a roof over their heads. It takes a village of tiny homes with resources in the areas of medical and mental health, financial literacy classes, education, employment, public assistance, community, mentors,

substance abuse treatment, driver's education, family reunification skills, and general life skills to set these youths up for success (Stepping Stones, 2023).

Child welfare agencies also need to better prepare transitional youth for the transition into adulthood prior to aging out. According to Jones (2011), youth within foster care did not listen or pay attention to independent living skills they were being taught because they had no say in the matter. Transitional youth want a voice; they want to be able to tell child welfare what their needs are. They want and need help after they leave care, they want continual contact with a social worker, they want someone to teach them how to drive, they want to learn to cook and eat healthy, and they want someone to pay attention to their substance abuse (if they have an issue), and they want to be cared for when they are in the foster care system. Aging out foster youth should have a voice in what types of services are offered to them, they should have a voice in a family reunification plan, and they should have the option of continued services after they age out. These young adults need a myriad of services, and they know best what their needs are. By giving them a voice in their unmet needs they are being taught that they do have a voice, which is often not felt as if that is the case while in foster care. This process is teaching them that their voices are being heard and respected.

Final Recommendation

The majority of aging out young adults have never experienced a stable, peaceful home. According to Hirschi's' social bonding theory, a lack of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief are prime deterrents for deviant behavior (Cusick et al., 2012). Ensuring these young adults have a roof over their heads fosters attachment to a community, commitment to conventional norms and values, for example, paying rent, involvement in at least employment, the rent cannot get paid without employment, and belief of the norms and values of conventional

society. Providing housing is the number one priority for these young adults. Once these children have a place to call home the real work can begin, the work of learning how to trust, love, and respect, the work of instilling a sense of self-confidence and self-worth, the work of repairing many years of abuse and neglect, the work of healing the mind, body, and spirit, because that is what they deserve.

Conclusion

The recurring theme within this research is transitional youth want to be heard, they want what the “normal” kids have, education, respect, opportunity, love, a place to call home, someone to turn to and to look up to, someone they can depend on, perhaps for the first time in their lives. It is not too late for them. They deserve better and society can do better. The problem is much larger than just housing, the foster system is very far from an ideal, traditional childhood and growing up within the system creates trauma, it creates emotional, mental, and psychological problems that must be addressed if these children are to heal and become responsible, healthy, and independent adults.

In providing transitional youth with housing and the support they need, society is also reducing the population of the criminal justice system, since 25% of aging out teens will be incarcerated within two years. This will especially impact the potential participation of these youth in prostitution, theft, and burglary. Providing this support can also reduce teen pregnancy, since 70% of females aging out will become pregnant by the time they are 21, and society can combat mental health issues by providing aging out teens with the treatment they need. Through the provision of support, society can also combat substance abuse, sexually transmitted disease, gang involvement, and perhaps early death among these youth, who are more prone to participate in the behaviors that can lead to tragedy. These children need a continuum of care regardless if

they age out 18, 21, or 23, they are not equipped with the living skills, the emotional maturity, or mental and psychological skills necessary to navigate adulthood.

There are two occurring words throughout this research and they are resilience and perseverance. These children are the definition of resilience and have exhibited so much perseverance, they have, or they are currently overcoming the odds of their success. However, they need more, they need more resources, they need these resources prior to aging out, as 18 - 21 years old they need empathy, they need respect, and they need to learn how to trust. They need more than just counseling; they need intensive mentorship and a roof over their heads to that will help them make successful transitions.

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