

## Transition to Safe, Stable and Affordable Housing

Young people leave foster care with several appropriate goals. They return safely to their birth families, are placed with a caring relative or adopted. This is not always the case for some 26,000 youth nationally.<sup>1</sup> Depending on the geographic area where they reside, young people leave or emancipate from foster care at either age 18, 19, 20 or 21 and the state role and responsibilities are diminished upon emancipation. Emancipated youth may return to the unsafe environment of an abusive parent, live temporarily with a friend in crowded space or become homeless, all options that compromise their safety and well-being. Statistics indicate that three out of 10 homeless adults report a history of foster care.<sup>2</sup>

While under the supervision of the state or county, young people mostly reside in foster homes, and a few in residential settings. These living arrangements are no longer available once the foster youth emancipate.

In all states, social workers and independent living coordinators work with young people prior to leaving state custody. Issues such as locating relatives or adult mentors, finding affordable housing, completing their education and job preparation are addressed in the youth's transition plan. Congress made transition planning more comprehensive through the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351). To ensure that young people's housing needs are addressed, the law requires states to include specifics on housing options, as well as for education, local opportunities for mentors, and workforce supports and employment services,<sup>3</sup> all of which help stabilize the young person's living environment.

Child welfare agencies provide support services, including rental assistance, to help young people as they transition out of foster care. This support may include assistance with a security deposit and/or monthly assistance with rent.<sup>4</sup> Child welfare agencies also coordinate with local Housing Authorities when providing assistance. However, the national housing crisis has hampered agencies' ability to find affordable housing options for young people once they leave care.

If housing options are available, youth need to maintain them. Rental assistance may be time limited and young people need to work in order to pay the bills. A living wage is critical and foster youth also need the necessary skills to become employable. Young people who emancipate experience higher unemployment rates, particularly during the current economic crisis. Child welfare agencies provide job and vocational skills training and work with young people to locate career opportunities such as internships. Social workers and independent living coordinators help young people craft résumés and role-play interview scenarios.

In addition to room and board, youth need basic supplies for their homes, including furniture, dishes, pots and pans, bath towels and sheets. These are items foster youth generally do not acquire during their time in care.

Many foster youth emancipate once they have graduated from high school. Some are able to go onto college where housing is available. Advanced education allows for greater employment opportunities, which in turn, may aid help a young person find better housing. When colleges and universities are closed, it is rare that a former foster youth is able to remain on campus. During vacations, holidays and breaks these young people need to find alternative living arrangements.

Parenting youth have another set of challenges when it comes to locating affordable housing, in addition to available child care and transportation options.

### Federal Programs for Housing Assistance

Along with state and local resources, child welfare and housing authorities create a patchwork of many federal funding streams in order to provide housing options for former foster youth. Below are examples of those used by state and local governments.

- **John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program**—assists public child welfare agencies to serve youth in transition. Chafee funds enable older youth (ages 18–21) to receive housing assistance and provide states with flexible funding to offer supportive services to those who choose to remain in care.

- **Educational Training Vouchers**—allocate Chafee funding for states to offer room and board for youth who attend college.
- **Section 8 Housing Vouchers**—offer low-income families and individuals affordable housing options under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Section 8 vouchers offer supplemental funding for persons who are unable to afford the full cost of rent.
- **Family Unification Program**—extends funding to states so they can provide Section 8 vouchers to older youth.
- **Supportive Housing**—provides services to chronically homeless individuals who experience health, mental health and employment challenges. States that operate supportive housing programs are able to provide these individuals with a safe and stable place to live.

#### Examples of Current State Practice

**Arizona** provides up to \$1,800 per year for assistance in obtaining or maintaining housing-related costs, including other than room/board—such as food, clothing and furniture. The state also allows young people to remain in their foster care placement setting until 21 if they are pursuing their education, training or employment goals. If a youth leaves care at 18, he or she may request to return.<sup>5</sup>

The Rapid Housing Program is a part of a menu of services offered to transitioning youth in the **District of Columbia**. Youth are provided with financial assistance for a year or more if needed. Additionally, after-care specialists assist youth with the identification of housing and counseling around complex housing needs.<sup>6</sup>

The **Michigan** State Housing Development Authority has contracts to expand programs for foster youth as part of its plan to end homelessness. The authority developed 8–10 homeless youth projects across the state. Funds may be used to provide rental assistance for young people ages 18 to 24, for a maximum of two years. The city of **Detroit** provides eviction prevention services to ensure that youth sustain housing for the long term.<sup>7</sup>

**Alaska** allows youth leaving custody to apply for two months' rent at 100 percent. The third month's rent is paid for at 50 percent and the fourth at 25 percent. This provides time for young person to secure employment and gradually increase their level of responsibility.<sup>8</sup>

**Indiana** provides up to \$3,000 for room and board assistance. Youth must be in care at 18 and will be supported until 21. Additionally, the state provides access up to \$1,000 to purchase items needed from the apartment through the Emancipation Goods and Services Program.<sup>9</sup>

In **South Carolina**, youth receive assistance with phone, electric, gas and water deposits and rental assistance for up to six months. The first three months are paid 100 percent by the state, the fourth month at 75 percent, the fifth at 50 percent and the final month at 25 percent. If a young person is pregnant or has a child less than one year of age the six months are paid in full by the state. Additionally, young people receive \$1,500 for furniture and \$2,000 if the youth has a child or is pregnant.<sup>10</sup>

**Iowa's** foster youth may enter a Supervised Apartment Living program if it is part of a transition plan. In many cases, the SAL setting is an apartment rented by the youth or by an agency on behalf of the youth. Youth may remain in SAL through the age of 18 and longer if completing their educational goals.<sup>11</sup>

#### Conclusion

The goal for state and county child welfare directors is to reduce the number of young people leaving the system without a family. The focus on permanency options such as living with a relative or adoptive parent is one way to accomplish this goal. Another way is to keep young people in foster care until the age of 21, when they are more likely to be self-supporting.

Providing a service array for transitioning youth is critical. Housing combined with employment, education and health services also helps build stability.

<sup>1</sup> Kids are Waiting Campaign. December 2007.

<sup>2</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness. *The Relationship Between Foster Care and Homelessness*. 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Congressional Research Service. *Child Welfare: The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008* (P.L. 110-351).

<sup>4</sup> National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. *State Policies to Help Youth Transition Out of Foster Care*. January 2007.

<sup>5</sup> National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators. *Youth Aging Out Survey 2006*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.