

FYI In the News



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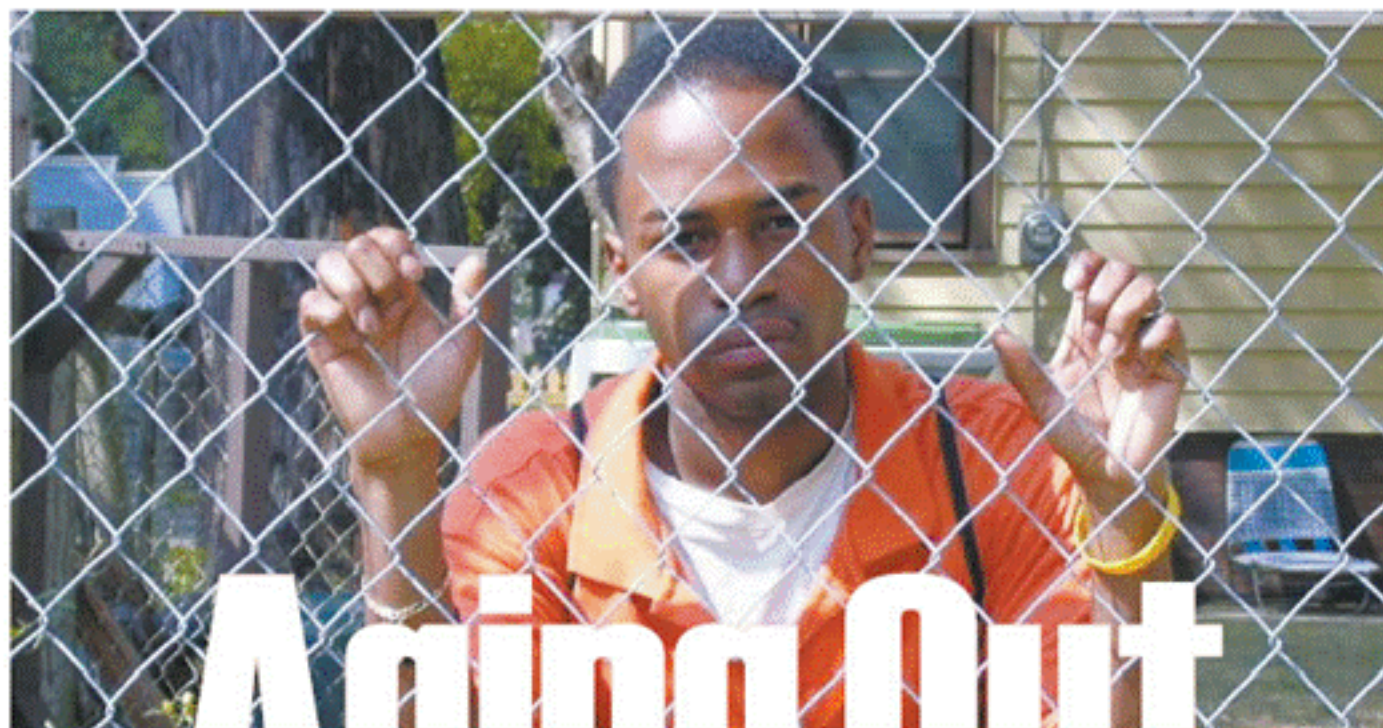
“If you are a gay kid, turn 18 and are aged out of the foster care system with no job skills, no home and no high school diploma, what do you think is going to happen? What options do you have? Prostitution becomes a real option when you are a kid thrown into this situation,” explained James Perkul.

“I know what these kids go through. I was in foster care for 18 years and was abused. At 18 I was thrown out of my home with no high school diploma and no job skills. I was homeless. I vowed at that time that one day I would help kids to keep from becoming like me.”

All these past experiences culminated in Perkul founding the Foster Youth Independence Center of Milwaukee (FYI) three years ago.

Aging out is a term used to describe the state mandate that says when a foster child turns 18, all the State’s custodial rights regarding the child cease. At the same time, payment to the foster family for the child’s care stops. So for many of these young adults, like Perkul, life as they know it ends; they are left homeless and alone.

Materials produced by FYI say that “children who age out of foster care in Wisconsin are 12 times more likely to become homeless than other children” and “over 20 percent of these children report living in five or more places within 18 months” of aging out. In all, a little over one-third of aged-out children do not have a high school diploma or GED and fewer than one in 10 attend college.



Aging Out

By Holly Grey

Foster care youth are ejected from the system with little or no support

A recent study by the Wisconsin Independent Living Advisory Committee found that aged-out children experience unemployment or underemployment. In addition, they are far more vulnerable to physical and sexual victimization and utilize public assistance in higher proportions than other children. The Department of Health and Human Services reports that 6,274 children aged out of the foster care system between 1992 and 1998.

Working with kids ages 15 to 18, FYI provides early intervention services that help transition foster children from custodial care to living independently. “What we want to do is intervene early so these kids don’t have to go through the hardships and crisis that a lot of foster kids end up going through when they age out,” Perkul explained. “On many levels we function in the place of parents.”

Case managers from the Milwaukee County Bureau of Child Welfare refer children to FYI for a specific service. After meeting with the child, FYI develops an individualized program for that child’s specific needs. A program may be designed to help the child with a job search, including training on how to fill out a job application or how to interview. In some instances, the program may include the purchase of an outfit for the referee to wear to a job interview. Other youths need assistance with homemaking or self-care skills.

For many, the major challenge is securing affordable housing. FYI assists the young adults in locating apartments and then subsidizes the rent until they can manage on their own. In return for the rent assistance, the youth is required to work with FYI in be-

coming completely self-sufficient.

“We do charge a fee for our services, but it is not enough to do one-on-one with the young person,” said Perkul. “So many times we can do the how-to-find-a-job training, but there will be no money left over to buy the interview outfit. It’s a struggle.”

“Grant money exists, but it’s very limited,” Perkul elaborated. “We are currently working with 25 kids. The plan is to work with 100 kids next year. In order to reach our goals and meet all these kids’ needs, we are actively seeking donations from individuals and corporations to fill in the gaps.”

FYI’s biggest organizational challenges are twofold. “Educating the public on the crisis of aged-out foster children and obtaining grant funding and donations is crucial to the well-being of our efforts,” explained Perkul. “We can’t survive and assist these kids without it.”

To aid in building public awareness of the challenges facing aged-out youth, FYI is holding a free public viewing, to be followed by a discussion, of the award-winning documentary “Aging Out.” “Aging Out” chronicles foster care youth as they are ejected from the system and forced to fend for themselves without family support or a stable home and with meager financial resources and survival skills.

The viewing will be Oct. 13 at 7 p.m. at the Gordon Park Pavilion, 2828 N. Humboldt Blvd. “Donations will be greatly, greatly appreciated,” stressed Perkul.