



## Riverwest Currents

### FYI: Fostering Independence

by Suzanne Zipperer, photo by Vince Bushell

Foster Youth Independence Center helps foster children transition to adulthood. Parents of “grown” children realize that their work doesn’t end at age 18. Young adults still need plenty of guidance, regular financial assistance, and the occasional “kick in the butt” to move their lives forward in a positive direction. For youth “aging out” of the foster care system, however, such support is missing. The State’s role in a foster child’s life ends at 18, 19 if they’re still in high school. That means that once out on their own, many of these kids often end up homeless and may turn to crime to support themselves.

The Foster Youth Independence Center of Milwaukee, Inc., which opened its office at 2672 N. Holton St. in January, helps foster children prepare for life on their own. Its mission is simply stated: to provide programs and services to youth aging out of foster care that will enable them to transition into adulthood as independent and responsible citizens.

Executive Director James A. Pekrul explained that the process of “aging out” means that the state’s role as custodian of a child ends when the child becomes an adult at 18. At that time, payment to the foster family for the child’s care ends as well.

“Many foster parents don’t have high levels of education,” Pekrul said. “They have big hearts, but they depend on that money to take care of their households’ needs.” These families often can’t support the extra child. But even if the child could help with his/her own support, the law says that a licensed foster home cannot have anyone living in the house that is over the age of 18 and not a relative. “If the family has three foster children who are younger,” Pekrul explained, “guess what you do? You sacrifice the one to save the three.”

The decision to move out, however, is also often made by the youth. At 18, one can choose to be out on his/her own. As with most young people, this looks like a great option until they learn how difficult it is to get a job, pay the rent, and take care of themselves. Pekrul had direct experience with this when his own foster son decided to move out, even though he wasn’t finished with high school. In a typical rebellion against “my house/my rules,” Brandon Johnson moved in with a friend. Johnson has yet to find a job and realizes how vulnerable to homelessness he is. Pekrul continues to provide help for Johnson using his own resources.

FYI’s role is to prepare foster children ages 15 to 18 to live independently. It offers a menu of services to the agencies that contract to case manage foster care for Milwaukee County Bureau of Child Welfare. “What we want to do is intervene so these kids don’t have to go through the hardships and crisis that a lot of foster kids end up going through,” Pekrul explained. Working with the kids before they leave the home may prevent problems when they are out on their own. “The next step for us is that if they find themselves at 18 or 19 in that crisis, to provide those same kids with direct programming and services, and hopefully housing.”

Case managers refer youths for a particular service. For example, FYI may help the youth with a job search. That could include teaching him or her how to fill out an application, do an interview, and even obtain vital records, such as a social security card. Other youths may need homemaking or self-care skills. After meeting with the youth, FYI puts together an Individualized Independent Living plan that sets goals for the services.

At this time, Pekrul provides the direct service himself. The goal, however, is to recruit and train adults who would then be assigned to work with youth on particular skills. A volunteer coordinator has come forward to manage that effort.

A major challenge is housing. Rents are high, roommates with healthy lifestyles are hard to come by and setting up group homes for youths “aging-out” is not a good option. Both Pekrul, who was once a foster child himself, and Johnson have had experiences in group homes. The homes often have a mixture of kids, some of whom have serious problems. They are good at monitoring behavior, but don’t teach independence.

Pekrul’s solution is to help youths find apartments and subsidize the cost until they can manage on their own. In return, the youths would be required to work with FYI on becoming self-sufficient. Once they can manage the rent by themselves, the subsidies stop, but the youth can remain in the apartment. This creates a stronger connection between the youth and the community, which is a goal identified by the Annie E. Casey Foundation as linked to successful transitions to adulthood.

Pekrul is looking for landlords willing to be part of the program. The advantage for the landlord is that FYI will be working with the youth continually and can be called upon to intervene if the youth causes a problem. Also, the rent is guaranteed for a certain amount of time.

One of the challenges of creating a new nonprofit is finding funding. FYI now has a board of directors and is approaching foundations. The strategic plan for next year calls for an expansion of staff and creating a volunteer base.