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Aging Out with Nowhere to Go

Older foster children aren't prepared for adulthood By Lisa Kaiser

When most individuals turn 18, they feel liberated. They're able to live on their own, be rid of their parents, vote and make their own decisions.

But when children in foster care turn 18, their independence is more complicated. The checks to the foster parents end, which means that many foster children are forced out of the house before they're ready, some into homelessness or unsafe living situations. Financial support ends, too, and so does health care coverage. What also disappears are all of the little things that young adults depend on while they transition into adulthood—coming home to do laundry, eat free meals, celebrate holidays, borrow money or a car, or to get advice about and support for college or a job.

"When I was 18 I was told to leave," said James A. Pekrul, who grew up in a foster home and is now a foster parent to two boys. "I was scared. I didn't know where I was going to live. I didn't have a job or a diploma. Within 24 hours my life changed." Much like Pekrul, many children "aging out" of foster care are not equipped to handle sudden independence. According to a report developed by the Children's Aid Society in New York, "Without family or any other dependable adults to rely on for assistance, these young people are, not surprisingly, at high risk of homelessness, joblessness, illness, incarceration, welfare dependency, early childbearing and sexual and physical victimization."

Aging Out of Milwaukee's Foster Care
Foster care in Milwaukee is a work in progress. The state took over the system in 1998 in response to a lawsuit, but problems remain. According to a recent study, a significant percentage of children in Milwaukee's foster care are placed in multiple homes, suffer abuse from or are neglected by their foster parents and aren't getting the health screenings they need.

Children aging out of this system are finding challenges outside of it. The Department of

Health and Human Services found that in Wisconsin, two-thirds of foster children left the system at 17 and many became parents at an early age, or were homeless or incarcerated.

"The Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare recognizes that although youths may be leaving our care as a child welfare agency, they are still in need of support and services," said Denise Revels Robinson, director of the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare. "Connections to caring adults and supportive organizations and communities are essential in continuing to help them make the transition to independence."

Pekrul said the lack of preparation or proper guidance from a foster parent or mentor bodes ill for older foster children. "You take them out of a bad situation, usually their birth parents, and put them in a foster care situation, which usually isn't that great, and then you dump them on the streets," said Pekrul. "It's a recipe for disaster."

Reaching Out to Teens

Seeing a need to help these children, Pekrul founded the Foster Youth Independence Center of Milwaukee. Although there are other programs that reach out to aging out youth, the FYI center is the only social service agency in the state to target this population. Located in Riverwest, the FYI Center connects with teenagers before they age out of foster care to develop an independent living plan, sort of a road map to adulthood. Some clients need help obtaining a Social Security number and other important documents, while others need help with school or with seeking employment, preparing for interviews and developing job skills.

Some teens' needs are more immediate. When FYI Center opened its doors earlier this year, four social workers called Pekrul to say they had children aging out who would become homeless. "Foster parents have no responsibility once the children age out," Pekrul said. "Of course the Bureau [of Milwaukee Child Welfare] wants them to

continue to support them, but I've met too many foster children whose parents said 'You're grown up, you're done, you should be on your own.'"

Beatrice Green, a psychologist who works with the FYI Center, said if former foster children don't have a positive role model or a safe place to go, they will face serious issues in the real world. "Many children will become homeless, or girls will have unsatisfactory relationships and unplanned pregnancies so that they can build their own families and feel a sense of stability," Green said. "We don't like to talk about it, but some of the boys will become hustlers who trade sex for survival. There's a daily struggle for existence and once these children become seduced into that kind of society, it's hard to get them back."

To build awareness of those who are aging out of foster care, the FYI Center will screen *Aging Out*, an award-winning documentary by Roger Weisberg and Vanessa Roth. The film follows the lives of teens in foster care, and what they encounter outside of the system. "It's a very powerful film," Pekrul said. "I've watched it and I ask that all of my staff watch it. It hit the situation right on the mark."

Aging Out will be shown at the Gordon Park Pavilion, 2828 N. Humboldt Blvd., on Oct. 13 at 7 p.m. Donations are appreciated.

