

On Their Own: Youth Who Age Out of Foster Care

Over the past two decades, America has experienced rapid growth in the population of children in foster care. In 1980, 300,000 children in America lived in foster care. **Today, more than 500,000 children in America live in foster care, with 8,000 of these children living in Wisconsin.** Children who enter foster care have emotional, behavioral, developmental, and health problems that reflect the difficult family and environmental circumstances that caused them to be removed from their homes in the first place. Most of the children in foster care return to their families or are adopted (often by their foster parents), but not all.

Each year, approximately 20,000 of these children in America leave foster care by “aging out of the system”; 350 of them are from Wisconsin. In most states, youth age out of foster care when they turn 18 or graduate from high school. However, in Wisconsin, the Children’s Code states that an out-of-home placement order shall terminate when a child reaches age 18, or one year after entry, or at age 19 if the child is still enrolled full-time in secondary education and is expected to graduate, which ever date is later unless a judge terminates the order at an earlier date.

The following table lists 2004 foster care statistics for Couleecap’s service area and the State of Wisconsin:

	Crawford	La Crosse	Monroe	Vernon	State of WI
# of children in foster care*	9	129	28	20	8,000
# of youth, ages 15-21, eligible for Independent Living Program (ILP) services*	11	43	14	15	4,962
# of youth, ages 15-21, that received ILP services*	10	38	14	13	3,750

* Source: WI Foster Care Program, Bureau of Programs and Policies, DCFS/DHFS

The number of youth aging out of foster care in our area varies greatly from year to year. Conventional wisdom indicates that at age 18 youth are not fully prepared to live independently without some level of support. Youth usually receive ongoing emotional and financial support as they transition to adulthood from stable families and communities. However, youth aging out of the foster care system often find themselves trying to transition without the benefit of these supports. When these youth leave the system, they are usually ill equipped to live independently. In such areas as high school completion, employment, accessing health care, continued educational opportunities, housing and transitional living arrangements, foster youth often do not get the help they need.

The statistics on life after foster care are troubling. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin, in a 1998 study of youth who had been out of foster care for 12 to 18 months, found that 37% had not finished high school, 32% were receiving public assistance, 12% had been homeless at least once since their discharge from foster care, and about 18% had been incarcerated at some point since their discharge. Another study done by Westat, Inc., of Rockville, Md., found that two to four years after youth left foster care, 60% of the young women had given birth to a child. The problems of adolescents in foster care are compounded by their considerable and overlapping health and mental health problems. Approximately 30%-40% of foster children have physical or emotional difficulties. Those leaving care are at especially high medical risk and likely to have acute, chronic and complex health needs

resulting from past neglect or abuse. Yet a major problem for this population is their lack of even minimal medical coverage. A 2001 longitudinal study of youth leaving care found that 44% had problems obtaining health care “most or all of the time”.

Enacted in response to increased awareness of the challenges confronting youth transitioning out of foster care, President Clinton signed the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 into law. Passed in late 1999 with bipartisan support, the law establishes the John J. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program - named in honor of the late Rhode Island senator, an original sponsor of the act and a long-time champion of children. The Chafee legislation doubled funds available to independent living programs from \$70 million to \$140 million per year. States must contribute a 20% match and “funds can be used to help youths make the transition from foster care to self-sufficiency by offering them the education, vocational and employment training necessary to obtain employment and/or prepare for post secondary education, training in daily living skills, substance abuse prevention, pregnancy prevention and preventive health activities, and connections to dedicated adults”. The Act also recognizes the need for special help for youth ages 18 to 21 who have left the foster care system by providing that states can use up to 30 % of their Independent Living Program funds for room and board for individuals in that age bracket. States may also extend Medicaid (health insurance) to 18, 19 and 20-year-olds that have been emancipated from foster care, but are not required to.

Independent Living Programs

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501(c)3 charitable organization created in 1966. Our four-county service area includes Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties in Wisconsin. For more than 39 years, we have been helping low-income people build on their strengths and become more self-sufficient. We operate over 30 programs in the areas of family and youth services, housing, and emergency services. Each of the counties in Couleecap’s service area has some type of Independent Living Program for youth aging out of foster care. These programs were created in response to the Foster Care Independent Act.

Through a sub-contract from the Monroe County Human Services Department, Couleecap operates the Independent Living Program in Monroe County. This program serves youth, ages 15-21, aging out of foster care in Monroe County. Through this program, youth regularly meet with the program coordinator, Matt Gaworski, to develop an individualized Independent Living Plan meeting his/her particular needs. Youth also attend a series of eight workshops on topics such as budgeting, household management, healthy relationships, effective decision-making, health and nutrition, housing options, community resources, healthy activities, and employment. These workshops allow youth to observe and practice many of the skills that they will need to succeed on their own. The following story is one example of a youth that Couleecap is helping to make a successful transition from foster care to living independently:

Robin (not her real name) is a Monroe County youth who found herself having to overcome many obstacles. Robin’s parents passed away when she was younger and she was quickly moved into out-of-home placement. She spent the majority of her formative years in and out of group homes and was not doing well in school. With the help of school administrators and the Monroe County Independent Living Program, Robin turned her attitude and grades around, became a mentor for other youth in similar situations, graduated high school, and now lives on her own and maintains two jobs while going to a local technical college. While she finds it difficult at times to be on her own, Robin is a very hard worker, understands the importance of a good education, and hopes to graduate in two years.

How You Can Make a Difference

Every youth turning 18 in America needs support; foster children doubly so because they often do not have the same pre-existing sources of stability and guidance necessary to learn how to manage the activities of daily independent living. Here are some ways you can help make a difference in the lives of youth aging out of foster care in your area:

- Donate your time, money, or other resources to local programs that help youth aging out of foster care.
- Mentor a foster care youth or become a foster care parent.
- Support elected officials who care about foster care issues.
- Educate yourself about foster care issues. Visit your local library or research websites on the Internet. Some good websites are Kids County Data Book – www.kidscount.org; Child Trends – www.childtrends.org; and Connect for Kids – www.connectforkids.org.
- Support tuition waivers for college for youth aging out of foster care.
- Advocate for extended medical care, greater accessibility to information and resources, and reworking of the foster care system to create greater educational stability to help these youth succeed.

Presented by Shelly Teadt, Director of Planning, Couleecap, Inc. Westby WI 54667

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