

# Aging Out of Foster Care

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Youth Aging Out of Foster Care Face Poverty, Homelessness and the Criminal Justice System



**ON  
THE Issues**  
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



The Children's  
Aid Society  
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### Executive Summary

*The Children's Aid Society believes that youth aging out of foster care have a better chance of a smooth transition to adulthood if we provide comprehensive, age-appropriate services and deliver them regularly and consistently. There are already many services available, but they must be co-located in sites that have a youth-centered, welcoming approach.*

Lisa Jenson<sup>ii</sup> was always a responsible person. She cared for her younger brothers and sisters and she barely knew her father. She was entirely responsible for herself from age 11 because, as with so many foster children in the late '80s, Lisa's mom was addicted to crack. In her neighborhood, it seemed that everyone was buying and selling crack. Lisa often ducked behind buildings to avoid gunfire. For several years, she and her brother used the family's public assistance and their earnings from bagging groceries to feed and clothe their three younger siblings. But when Lisa started skipping school to change diapers, cook and clean, her absences were reported to child welfare. The Administration for Children's Services took custody of the children, ages 1 month to 15 years, in 1994.

Once she was in foster care, Lisa often felt suicidal. She couldn't see her brothers and sisters, as the family was separated and kept moving from place to place. She felt terribly alone. Some of her foster parents were kind and supportive, but more often they were not.

Although Lisa's determination helped her to graduate from high school, she quit a steady job as a security guard for a job that turned out to be a scam. She made \$1.00 the first month and nothing the second and third. As a result, she was evicted from her apartment for non-payment. Lisa moved around the city staying with various friends and borrowed money to eat. She applied for public assistance and spiraled into depression.

*Adolescents age out of foster care with few of the skills needed for independent lives.*

- Each year, approximately 20,000 of the 542,000 children in foster care nationwide are discharged to live on their own.<sup>iii</sup>
- Five percent of these, approximately 1,100 young adults, are discharged to fend for themselves in New York City.<sup>iv</sup>

Already burdened by their childhood experiences of abuse, neglect or abandonment, young people leave the foster care system with few of the independence skills necessary to live productively in the world. They are not equipped to find and retain gainful employment. Many have untreated physical and mental health needs and no health insurance. Most have no housing options. Some

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have no legal immigration status. And none has had the benefit of parental role models to transmit the expertise needed to negotiate the trials of living on one's own.

According to studies of young people who have been discharged in various states:

- 12-30 percent struggled with homelessness;
- 40-63 percent did not complete high school;
- 25-55 percent were unemployed; those employed had average earnings below the poverty level, and only 38 percent of those employed were still working one year after discharge;
- 30-62 percent had trouble accessing health care due to inadequate finances or lack of insurance;
- 32-40 percent were forced to rely on some form of public assistance and 50 percent experienced extreme financial hardship;
- 31-42 percent were arrested;
- 18-26 percent were incarcerated; and
- 40-60 percent of the young women were pregnant within 12-18 months of leaving foster care.<sup>v</sup>

*Support and life skills training help teens make the transition.*

### Solid Preparation Can Facilitate a Smooth Transition to Adulthood

Too often, the child welfare system seems unable to provide sound strategies for moving youth from foster care to independence. In order to make a successful transition to adulthood, adolescents in foster care must have preparation, support and guidance before, dur-

ing and after discharge from the system.<sup>vi</sup> These comprehensive services must be tailored to youth ages 14-24 who are at various stages of development and maturation, and these services must be regularly and consistently available. The most important components are:

- ***Mental and Physical Health Care.*** Teens in care and young adults who age out of foster care need help connecting to a primary health care clinic where they can be enrolled in health insurance, receive regular, age-appropriate medical care and have access to mental health services.
- ***Education Consulting and Career Services.*** College preparation should begin at least by the eighth grade and provide tutoring, college tours and financial literacy and scholarship workshops. For youth seeking non-college opportunities, programs such as The Children's Aid Society's Neighborhood Youth Employment Program (NYEP) can provide training, career counseling and internship and apprenticeship opportunities. Summer job placement can provide opportunities to learn on-the-job skills and solidify future employment at outside organizations and corporations.
- ***Sexuality and Family Planning Program.*** Comprehensive sexuality education and access to adolescent health services are also critical strategies to prevent teen pregnancy. Comprehensive education that covers both

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abstinence and contraceptive methods and health services that are stage-appropriate and accessible must be provided.

- **Financial Management Training.** Practical instruction in budgeting, saving, banking, paying bills, borrowing and managing debt and credit is critical for youth who are aging out and will soon manage their own finances.
- **Mentoring and Leadership Training.** Peer education and leadership training programs can help youth address issues such as violence, victimization and racial tensions. These programs can also help alleviate the effects of these issues and help build healthy, long-term relationships. A functioning, high-visibility citywide youth advisory board would ensure appropriate, effective and high-quality programming, youth speak-outs, civics instruction, access to public service opportunities and a forum for practicing leadership skills.

*Former foster youth need continued advice and help after their move to independence.*

### Post-Foster Care Support Can Help Ensure Economic Stability

Just as parents are called on to provide their grown children with help for a multitude of life problems, former foster youth should have a similar ability to seek advice and support after they move to independence. The following services are essential for stabilizing their adult lives and providing fallback services in times of need:

- **Housing Assistance.** Ensuring that no young person leaves the foster care system without adequate housing is primary to future stability. Additional program services should include ongoing access and individual assistance in locating apartments and broker listings, as well as legal education and advocacy in the event disputes arise. Vouchers and subsidies may be needed for several years after leaving care to ensure that housing is maintained while employment is stabilized.
- **Mental Health and Therapeutic Support Groups.** As youth mature and age out, they will confront issues of independent living, bereavement and trauma, unhealthy relationships, substance abuse and domestic violence, sex and sexuality and anger management. A full range of free and low-cost counseling services may help youth form better relationships and break the generational cycle of foster care.
- **Job Placement Program.** Just as college graduates may use their school's placement office for life-long employment listings, former foster youth should have a permanent relationship with an employment program that can provide job training, counseling and advice, internship and apprenticeship opportunities, a regularly updated listing of job openings and training in resume-writing, interviewing and professional etiquette.

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- **Legal Services.** As involvement with the court system is a pitfall for many former foster youth, access to competent legal advocacy and representation for all manner of civil issues, including housing, credit, identity theft, disability and family law matters, should be provided free or at low cost through neighborhood legal services providers.
- **Co-locate Services.** The city, state and federal governments already fund programs for employment, mental health, and other assistance. These include Work Incentive Initiative, Youth Development/Delinquency Prevention Program, Temporary Assistance to Needy

Families, Medicaid and foster care independent living funding. These services should be co-located in environments inviting to young people so that they can be easily accessed.

### Conclusion

If foster youth receive comprehensive services during the pivotal years between ages 14 and 24, they will begin to recoup the losses they have sustained, garner the practical tools essential to all young people embarking on independence and be better prepared to face the demands of society.

### Children's Aid on Foster Care

For children who grew up in foster care, successfully transitioning to self-sufficiency is difficult. To meet the needs of this population, The Children's Aid Society has developed the Next Generation Center, a state-of-the-art teen facility with a multi-disciplinary team of professionals committed to preparing and supporting foster youth before, during and after their discharge from the foster care system. While the center, designed with the help of the teens themselves, specializes in supporting youth in foster care, its doors are open to all young people making the transition to adulthood and independence. Our programming and services include youth leadership training, life skills, career readiness and job placement, educational guidance and advocacy, housing assistance, civil legal services, technology instruction, community service opportunities, counseling, arts and recreation. For more information call (718) 589-4441.

### About Children's Aid

For more than 150 years, The Children's Aid Society has been assisting New York City's children and their families without regard to race, religion, nationality or socio-economic status. Children's Aid helps children in every aspect of their lives from infancy through adolescence, providing guidance and resources to ensure a child's current well-being and future potential. With over 100 programs and more than 45 locations in New York that touch the lives of more than 150,000 children every year, Children's Aid is one of the country's largest and most innovative child and family social service agencies. Visit [www.childrensaidsociety.org](http://www.childrensaidsociety.org) or contact [policy@childrensaidsociety.org](mailto:policy@childrensaidsociety.org).

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- i One in a series of policy papers by The Children's Aid Society, 105 E. 22nd St., New York, NY 10010, (212) 358-8930.
- ii In this actual case, the names have been changed to protect the family's privacy.
- iii White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth, Final Report (October 2003), p. 104.
- iv In 2002, 1,052 young people were discharged to live on their own in New York City, and another 3,483 young people remained in foster care with a permanency-planning goal of "discharge to independent living." Administration for Children's Services (ACS), Office of Management Development & Research, "Progress on ACS Reform Initiatives: Status Report," March 2001, pp. 86-89. While independent living services might be especially crucial for young people aging out to themselves, all young people in foster care, ages 14 and up, are entitled to them in preparation for adulthood. 18 N.Y.C.R.R. § 430.12(f).
- v Richard P. Barth (1990), "On their Own: The Experiences of Youth After Foster Care," *Child and Adolescent Social Work* 7(5), 419-440; Ronna J. Cook et al. (1992), *A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs for Youth, Phase 2 Final Report* (Rockville, MD: Westat, Inc.); Mark Courtney & Richard Barth (1996), "Pathways of Older Adolescents Out of Foster Care: Implications for Independent Living Services," *Social Work* 41(1), 75-83; Mark Courtney & Irving Piliavin (1998), "Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood: 12 to 18 Months After Leaving Out-of-Home Care," (Madison, WI: School of Social Work and Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin); E.V. Mech (1994), "Foster White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth, Final Report," (October 2003), p. 104.
- vi According to one of the few available studies on youth aging out of foster care, young people who received support in order to attend post-secondary and vocational programs were more likely to obtain living-wage employment. Those who received extended assistance were less likely to become pregnant as teenagers, less likely to become involved in the criminal justice system and less likely to become homeless or join the welfare rolls after leaving care. Nixon, Testimony Before the House Committee on Ways and Means, citing Cook, R. et al. (1992), *A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs*.