

BY DOUGLAS W. NELSON

## GRATIFIED BUT NOT SATISFIED ON FOSTER CARE INDEPENDENCE

Research shows that no group in the United States is more predictably headed for unhappy outcomes than young people who spend their adolescence in foster care. As the articles in this issue of *ADVOCASEY* document, homelessness among former foster teens is widespread. Academic failure is commonplace. Stable, gainful employment is elusive for most foster care graduates well into their 20s, and untreated physical and mental health problems are pervasive.

This litany of failure constitutes a national shame. It is also a horrible waste.

Perhaps because they grow up with adversity and turmoil, many foster children develop extraordinary resilience—an often untapped reservoir of inner

I think also of Jessica, Shane, and Sarah, three young people who addressed the board of the Annie E. Casey Foundation this past summer. Despite suffering neglect and being separated from their parents at an early age, all three have completed high school or a GED, and all three have been working. Jessica and Shane have enrolled in college. Sarah, who hopes to enroll soon in training for a law enforcement career, is moving into her own apartment. As they told us of their struggles and triumphs, all three spoke with striking charm and disarming frankness. Their dignity and determination were unmistakable.

Despite their individual potential, however, and despite our obligation as a society to care for young

people who are removed from their families through no fault of their own, foster care systems throughout America too often deny adolescents meaningful opportunities to develop skills for independent living. Then we cut youth loose at age 18 and leave them to fend for themselves.

It requires no crystal ball to divine that kids are not ready to go from dependence to independence just because they have an 18th birthday—

or to see that young people who have lacked stable homes, who have been victimized by abuse or neglect, will require continuing support and assistance in early adulthood. Likewise, it does not take a high-speed computer to calculate that after spending tens of thousands of dollars to care for young people during childhood, it is money down the drain to ignore their developmental needs in adolescence and then abandon them as young adults. Foster youth need help developing the day-to-day problem-solving skills that most of us acquire naturally through interaction with our parents. They need support in times of crisis, a shelter from the storms that arise in

Our nation's conscience, and our good sense, demand that all of us continue to intensify our efforts to meet the needs and unlock the potential of this special population.

strength and talent. I think of Antwone Quenton Fisher, a Cleveland youth who suffered a harrowing childhood and an angry adolescence before migrating to Southern California and finding work as a security guard for Sony Pictures. At Sony, Fisher told a superior about his childhood and soon found himself courted by producers eager to turn his life story into a feature film. Sony executives offered to hire a seasoned scriptwriter, but Fisher turned them down. He wanted to write the story himself. He did, and the film began production this fall with Denzel Washington starring and directing.

the lives of young adults striving to overcome histories of abuse and instability.

For years, Casey Family Services (the direct services arm of the Annie E. Casey Foundation) has been providing comprehensive, ongoing support for adolescents in our foster care programs throughout New England and in Baltimore. Casey Family Programs, a national operating foundation established by the same family as Annie E. Casey, has also developed innovative and far-reaching programs to support the successful transition of foster teens. From follow-up studies, we know that youth who are provided these opportunities and supports are far more successful in young adulthood than other foster children.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs were gratified in 1999 when Congress passed the Foster Care Independence Act to expand and improve programs for foster teens in transition. We are pleased now to see states and communities all over the nation begin to focus more keenly on adolescent foster children and enhance programming for them.

We are gratified, but not satisfied. We are not satisfied because we know that a new federal program, a few more federal dollars, and new requirements to develop long-range plans and track results represent only first steps toward reversing this national tragedy.

That is why, early this year, we created the multiyear, multimillion-dollar Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative to support the development of better, more comprehensive programs and policies for foster youth in transition. And that is why we have dedicated this issue of *ADVOCASEY* to detailing the dimensions of the challenge and to documenting ambitious campaigns to meet it in Los Angeles County and other jurisdictions.

Our nation's conscience, and our good sense, demand that all of us continue to intensify our efforts to meet the needs and unlock the potential of this special population.

*Douglas W. Nelson is the president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.*



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*The Annie E. Casey Foundation was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of United Parcel Service, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother.*

*Editor: Dick Mendel*

# UNHAPPY OUTCOMES

## YOUTH AFTER FOSTER CARE

### EDUCATIONAL FAILURE

Percentage of former foster youth in a 1991 national survey who had not completed high school within 2.5 to 4 years after exiting care: **46%**

Percentage of former foster youth in San Francisco (1990) and Wisconsin (1998) who had not completed high school: **38%** and **37%**, respectively

### JOBLESSNESS & LOW INCOMES

Percentage of former foster youth in a national survey who were currently employed 2.5 to 4 years after leaving foster care: **49%**

Median earnings for former foster youth in Wisconsin during the first *two years* after exiting care: **\$4,478**

### EMOTIONAL & PHYSICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Percentage of former foster youth in Wisconsin who received mental health services while in foster care: **47%**

Percentage of these same youth who received mental health services after exiting care: **21%**

Percentage of former foster youth in Wisconsin who reported difficulty accessing health or mental health care services: **44%**

### HOMELESSNESS

Percentage of all young adults accessing federally funded youth shelters in 1997 who had previously been in foster care: **56%**

Percentage of foster youth in a national survey who had been homeless at least one night within 2.5 to 4 years after exiting foster care: **25%**

Percentage of foster youth in Wisconsin who had been homeless or lived in four or more places within 12 to 18 months after exiting care: **34%**

### CRIME, INCARCERATION, & PREGNANCY

Percentage of 18- to 21-year-old former foster youth in Clark County (Las Vegas), Nevada who say they have sold drugs to support themselves: **24%**

Percentage of these Clark County youth who say they had sex in exchange for money: **11%**

Percentage of these Clark County youth who spent time in jail: **41%**

Percentage of foster youth in a national survey who became parents within 2.5 to 4 years after exiting care: **42%**

*For information on the sources cited in the ADVOCASEY INDEX, send an e-mail to [webmail@aecf.org](mailto:webmail@aecf.org).*

BY DICK MENDEL

# FOSTERED or



NOW 29, FREDERICKA AFFLERBACH IS A WALKING SUCCESS STORY. FIRST TAKEN FROM HER TROUBLED, SUBSTANCE-ABUSING MOTHER AT THE AGE OF THREE, SHE IS TODAY A MATURE AND HEALTHY ADULT, A SELF-SUFFICIENT PARENT, AND A STEADY TAXPAYER.

After bouncing around during childhood from foster home to group home to residential treatment center and back again, Freddi, as she likes to be called, exited the foster care system and moved in with her boyfriend as she turned 18. After two years of chaotic, hand-to-mouth living in Camden, New Jersey, Freddi got pregnant. Then she made a decision. “I was tired of that lifestyle,” she says. Freddi enrolled in college classes and found a steady job at a local alternative school for emotionally disturbed and mentally retarded children. Gradually, she built a stable home.

Freddi’s success, however, is by no means the norm among “system kids”—children raised by child welfare agencies due to neglect or abuse by their parents, or to behavioral or mental health problems of their own. Nationwide, young people who spend all or most of their teen years in foster care suffer disproportionately as they enter adulthood. Homelessness, unemployment, academic failure, incarceration, and premature parenting are all commonplace—evidence that, as a surrogate parent for adolescents, our nation’s over-matched child welfare systems have been falling down on the job.

Thinking back on her tumultuous teen years, Freddi recalls that none of the foster families or group home caretakers she lived with—and there were dozens—took the time to teach her about securing health insurance, finding a job, or opening a bank account. Nor did any of Freddi’s caseworkers at the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) teach her survival skills for adult life. Resources to help pay the security deposit on an apartment, buy a first car, or take driving lessons were never offered. No help either in applying for college or securing financial aid.

Today, Freddi is acutely aware that most system kids still receive too little preparation for independent living. She knows because in August 2000, she took a new job as coordinator of “Just for You”—one of two dozen new programs launched throughout New Jersey in the past two years using funds from the new John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, enacted in December 1999 by Congress and the Clinton administration as part of the Foster Care Independence Act.

At Just For You, Freddi works with a dozen young people between the ages of 15 and 18, helping them look for jobs, track down birth certificates and Social Security cards, apply for college, and think through their plans for independence. She also has access to flexible funds to help participating teens pay for driving lessons, work clothes, auto insurance, and other expenses. In short, Freddi is providing exactly the kind of help that nobody offered her a dozen years ago.

Unfortunately, it remains support that the majority of foster teens in New Jersey—and nationwide—never receive. Just for You is one of only three similar independent living programs funded by DYFS in southern New Jersey. Together, the three programs serve just 40 young people in a seven-county area where 491 youth ages 16 and older are living in state-funded foster homes or institutions.

Most youth who age out of DYFS’ care never participate in an intensive independent living program like Just for You. Many—particularly those placed with foster families rather than in group homes—do not even receive basic classroom instruction in career planning, personal budgeting, or basic life skills before exiting the system. Only a handful get to practice living independently in their own apartments before DYFS terminates support and declares them adults.

**New Jersey, like other states, continues to fall short in preparing foster children for independence. Many teens leave care unprepared, unconnected, destined for homelessness and other crises.**

“There are no other people in South Jersey who do my job,” Freddi says. “There’s just me—me and Kevin [Countryman] and Jackie [Watkins],” coordinators of the other two independent living projects in the seven-county area. “There are tons of other kids who are not getting anything.”

## A NATIONAL CRISIS

The situation Freddi describes is not unique to New Jersey. Rather, it is symptomatic of a crisis that persists nationwide: inadequate support for foster teens, leading to serious problems for youth in the adult world.

Historically, scholars and child welfare officials have paid little attention to the fortunes of children who spend their adolescent years in foster care. Only a handful of useful studies have ever tracked former foster youth into adulthood.

Those few studies paint a troubling picture. “There’s no question,” says Gary Stangler, the former Missouri social services secretary who was named recently to direct the \$18 million Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, “that the outcomes for these youths are not very encouraging, even relative to the peer group of other at-risk youth.” (To learn more about the Jim Casey Initiative, see the interview with Stangler on p. 30.)

In 1991, Westat, Inc., completed a national survey of 810 former foster youth in eight states—the only study of its kind ever undertaken. The survey found that 2.5 to 4 years after exiting care, 25 percent of the youth had been homeless for at least one night, and 46 percent still lacked a high school diploma. Less than half (49 percent) of the youth were working, and only 38 percent had maintained employment for at least one year. Just one in six was fully self-supporting. Westat also found that 38 percent of the youth had been diagnosed with emotional disturbances, and 9 percent suffered from physical health problems. Despite their chaotic circumstances, 42 percent of the sample—including three-fifths of the young women—had already fathered or given birth to a child.

More recently, a study of former foster youth in Wisconsin found that 12–18 months after exiting care, 12 percent of sampled youth had been homeless and 22 percent had lived in four or more places—“couch surfing,” Freddi Afflerbach calls it. Released in 1998 by the University of Wisconsin’s Institute for Research on Poverty, the study found that 37 percent of the youth still lacked a high school degree, 39 percent were not employed, and 19 percent had not held any job since exiting foster care. A subsequent study by the same research team found that the median earnings for Wisconsin youth exiting care were just \$4,478 over the first two years of independent living.

The Wisconsin researchers found that 47 percent of surveyed youth received mental health services while they were foster children, but only 21 percent of these same youth got any mental health assistance after they exited care. Almost half the Wisconsin youth (44 percent) reported difficulties accessing needed medical care all or most of the time, most often because they lacked health insurance.

Among 100 former foster youth surveyed last year in Clark County (Las Vegas), Nevada, 18 percent had slept on the streets since leaving care and 19 percent had slept in homeless shelters. As in other surveys, Clark County youth also reported frequent troubles with the law: 41 percent had spent time in jail since leaving care.

## AN ARTIFICIAL LINE

With their histories of neglect and abuse and their lack of permanent family connections, young people who age out of foster care face immense challenges on the path to success in adulthood. Those challenges are compounded when child welfare systems fail to provide foster youth with the support typically available to their more advantaged peers.

“For most young people in America, leaving one’s home to be on your own means voluntarily giving up the security of the family. You leave when emotionally and economically ready for independence,” Connecticut

People are beginning to see our society’s responsibility for assisting foster

JANET KNIPE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE CALIFORNIA YOUTH CONNECTION

Independent Living Coordinator William Pinto told a congressional committee in 1999. “It’s a vastly different story for kids who have grown up in foster care . . . You leave the care or custody of the child welfare system because you have reached the statutory age for release, the magical age of 18. You’re off on your own, ready or not, expected to enter community life and self-sufficiency without the aid of a family or social service system.”

Until the mid-1980s, the federal government (and most states) offered no focused assistance for youth aging out of foster care. In 1986, Congress finally passed legislation to finance “independent living” efforts, but the program proved inadequate in several ways.

The law allowed services only to youth between the ages of 16 and 18, preventing agencies from helping 14- and 15-year-olds to begin planning for independence and learning necessary skills. Initially, the law also prohibited states from serving youth after they turned 18. Congress revised that rule in 1991, but it did not allocate additional funds to serve older youth. Thus, support for 18- to 21-year-olds remained limited.

“Most American youth don’t live independently until their mid-20s,” Mark Kroner, director of independent living programs for Lighthouse Youth Services in Cincinnati, Ohio, told the



Former “system kid” Freddi Afflerbach, now coordinator of “Just For You,” reviews Alexander De Jesus’ paperwork outside the Camden, New Jersey Social Security office.

**Nationwide, youth who spend all or most of their teen years in foster care suffer disproportionately as they enter adulthood. Homelessness, unemployment, academic failure, incarceration, and premature parenting are all commonplace.**

*Cincinnati Enquirer.* “But we expect foster children to be okay on their own at 18 without any help.”

Throughout the 1990s, federally funded independent living programs served just 60–70 percent of eligible foster care adolescents. More importantly, the services were highly uneven in quality and intensity. While youth in one state’s independent living programs received an intensive eight-week career development course, a national evaluation found in 1999, employment services in another state were limited to a half-hour consultation about immediate job leads.

The 1986 law authorized states to address three sets of independent living needs: education and employment, preparation for daily living, and transitional support. Yet glaring gaps were evident in each of these areas. In education, the Workforce Strategy Center concluded in 2000 that, among the programs it reviewed, “virtually without exception . . . educational preparation focused on achievement of the GED.” Conversely, a 1999 General Accounting Office study found that in one-third of the states independent living programs offer no support for post-secondary education. The Workforce Strategy Center reported a similar short-term, low-expectations thrust in employment services for foster youth. “Most of the employment training,” it

kids in this transition.

found, “is focused on immediate employment open to students with relatively little skills training as opposed to longer-term and more intensive career training.”

## DRIVERS EDUCATION WITHOUT THE CAR

Perhaps the most glaring gap in independent living programs during the 1990s, many experts argued, was the lack of opportunities for young people to practice living independently while still in the care of child welfare agencies.

“Independent living without housing is like driver training without the car,” says Mark Kroner, whose Cincinnati-area programs are often cited as a national model. “We read about all that stuff, we listened to the teacher. But really, until we got out on the road and had the wheel in our hand, that’s when we started thinking about what they were telling us.”

Federal rules prohibited states from using independent living funds to pay room and board expenses. Instead, most states concentrated on classroom training to teach youth independent living skills and concepts. “The life skills training is great,” Kroner says, “but . . . you can do 50 budgeting exercises with young people and still have them blow their budget the first week they get out on their own. These kids need to learn how to mis-manage money before they learn how to manage it. That means going without any food at all because they

spent all of their food money on something else. Or having their phone cut off because they ran up to many long distance phone calls.” (For more on Kroner’s program, see p. 27.)

## REINFORCEMENTS FROM WASHINGTON

In the late 1990s, growing discontent with independent living programs captured the attention of national leaders. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton invited recent foster care graduates to speak at a White House event on the issue in January 1999. The House Ways and Means Committee staged two high-profile hearings that spring, and in December President Clinton signed into law the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999.

The act replaced the 1986 independent living statute with a new initiative, the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, which doubled federal funding from \$70 million to \$140 million per year and broadened eligibility to include youth ages 14 to 21. The Chafee Program requires states to produce comprehensive five-year plans for independent living and to track and report long-term outcomes. States also must establish youth advisory councils to ensure that young people have a hand in setting priorities for independent living efforts and in tailoring programs to meet real needs.

In addition to these mandates, Chafee entitles states to extend Medicaid coverage for youth exiting foster care until their 21st birthdays, and it permits states to allocate up to 30 percent of their federal funding to cover room and board for young people in transition.

While lauding the Chafee program as a substantial step forward, many experts caution that it represents only a beginning. “Chafee doesn’t solve the problem,” says Robin Nixon, director of the National Foster Care Awareness Project. “It

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

**Most youth who age out of DYFS’ care never participate in an intensive independent living program. . . . Many do not even receive basic classroom instruction in career planning, personal budgeting, or basic life skills before exiting the system.**

# “I JUST NEED A START.”

## Youth in transition tell their stories

### NAIMAH BASHIR

Naimah Bashir rebelled wildly against her devout Muslim parents in her early teen years. Her parents called for help to the Division of Youth and Family Services, which placed Bashir into a youth shelter. She spent nearly two years in foster care bouncing from the shelter to a group home to an uncaring foster home, and then—after she ran away from the foster home—to a juvenile detention center. In April 1999, she entered the Job Corps.

In August 2001, at age 19, Bashir had a baby and a job, but no permanent home or health care coverage—and no assistance from DYFS. Instead, Bashir and her baby were sleeping some nights at her boyfriend’s brother’s apartment in Philadelphia, other nights with friends or family in New Jersey. Four months after the birth of her child, she still had not been for her six-week exam.

In August, Bashir contacted Kevin Countryman, coordinator and lone staff member of “On My Own,” one of just five aftercare programs serving recent DYFS graduates in New Jersey. Unfortunately, Countryman explained, the program was filled to capacity serving 14 young people with several others already on a waiting list.

Countryman said he would try to help Bashir informally, but he lost contact with her before resigning from the program in October 2001. “I don’t need welfare, but I need something,” Bashir said. “I just need a start.”

### ALAYNA PAINTER

Alayna Painter has endured a long journey since DYFS officials first removed her from the basement apartment of her drug-addicted mother in Camden almost a decade ago. In the summer of 2001, the odyssey landed her in an Atlantic City homeless shelter.

DYFS first placed her with an uncle. But Painter ran away, and—only 10 or 11 years old—she spent seven months sleeping in cars, hammocks, and porches. It was the first of several spells she would spend running the streets. In between, DYFS assigned Painter to group homes and foster families—some of them abusive, she said. “I ran away from a lot of places,” she recalled.

Painter stopped running at age 14, but DYFS continued to relocate her frequently. She attended six high schools in two years, until an aunt agreed to take her in. Painter stayed with the aunt for two years—catching up on credits and graduating from high school in 2001. But in the summer Painter, now 18, got into a heated argument with the aunt, and found herself homeless once again. This time she ended up at a Covenant House youth shelter, in the shadows of the Trump Taj Mahal casino on Atlantic City’s boardwalk.

During her years with DYFS, Painter never participated in an independent living program. “I never really thought about being independent until I got here,” she said. “I asked for other services, but they never gave me that. They said, ‘yeah,’ but then nothing ever happened.”

At Covenant House, Painter was finally getting the support she needs to ready herself for adult life. “If you do something wrong, there’s consequences, and they help you,” she said. “Anything you need is here—except for love from your mother.”

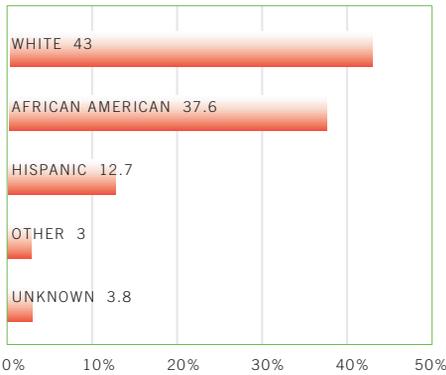
## FOSTER TEENS IN TRANSITION NATIONWIDE: THE NUMBERS

Adolescents and young adults in foster care (ages 16–21):  
**99,618** (September 30, 1999)

Youth and young adults emancipating from (or aging out of)  
foster care: **18,554** (October 1, 1998 to September 30, 1999)

Source: The AFCARS Report, Interim 1999 Estimates as of June 2001,  
Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

### RACE OF YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS (AGES 16–21) EXITING FOSTER CARE. TOTAL: 119,769



### DESTINATIONS FOR YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS (AGES 16–21) EXITING FOSTER CARE. TOTAL: 41,895



Source: Compiled by Dr. Marian C. Bussey, University of Denver Graduate  
School of Social Work, using data from the Adoption and Foster Care  
Analysis and Reporting System, Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of  
Health and Human Services. Data are for the fiscal year 1998.

only provides states an opportunity to develop the continuum of services that's required to solve the problem." Thus far, for instance, only four states have extended Medicaid coverage for foster youth up to age 21; meanwhile more than 30 states still offer no health coverage for youth who age out of care.

Nonetheless, Nixon and other experts report that the Chafee program has stimulated unprecedented attention to transitional living issues at the state and local levels. "People are beginning to see their—our society's—responsibility for assisting foster kids in this transition," says Janet Knipe, executive director of the California Youth Connection, a youth-led foster care advocacy group. "So I'm optimistic that we can continue to make progress and improve the support that young people receive. . . . But we still have a long way to go."

### NEW JERSEY — A MICROCOSM

Like her counterparts in other states, Nancy Caplan, New Jersey's independent living coordinator, is overseeing her state's Chafee programs and struggling to erect a comprehensive support system for foster teens in transition.

In addition to funding intensive case management programs like Freddi Afflerbach's Just for You, the state is appropriating \$1 million per year to open new emergency shelters and develop transitional housing opportunities, and it has allocated \$3 million for independent living activities over the past two years from flexible funds received under the federal welfare program. (These state investments have been critical, because—due to a drop in its share of the national foster care population since the 1980s—New Jersey is one of only two states that did not receive a funding increase under the Chafee program.) The state has also approved Medicaid health coverage for teens who age out of foster care.

"There's no question that the outcomes for these youths are not

Even with these investments, current programs serve only a fraction of youth who could benefit, Caplan acknowledges. But she says that the state has a multi-stage plan to reach more youth in the coming years. First, Caplan has been urging all agencies that work with foster teens to provide life skills training—offering free staff development opportunities for interested agencies plus access to flexible funds to pay for driver training, computer instruction, tutoring, and other constructive activities.

Over time, Caplan hopes that many more young people will be served through New Jersey’s “Children’s Initiative”—a far-reaching reform project launched by former Governor Christie Todd Whitman to restructure the state’s foster care and mental health treatment systems for children. In this effort, New Jersey is accessing millions in federal and state Medicaid funds to finance a wide range of services—including independent living activities—for youth in group homes and residential treatment facilities. “What I’m working toward is trying to get Medicaid to pay for the residential group homes to do life skills for the kids in their facilities,” Caplan says. “Then I can use all of our Chafee money for kids in foster [homes].”

### SOBERING DATA

While Caplan paints an optimistic picture for the future, a September 2001 report from the Garden State Coalition for Youth and Family Concerns shows that the situation today remains dire. The coalition—an ad hoc partnership involving Covenant House, the New School for Social Research, and others—found that almost half of all youth in homeless shelters across the state—46 percent—had been in DYFS care the previous year, and 45 percent of child care agencies responding to a coalition survey reported that they knew of foster youth served in 2000 who experienced homelessness after leaving care.

The Garden State Coalition found that, in 2000, only 38 percent of the 1,500 young people ages 16 and older in DYFS custody statewide participated in a formal independent living program. For recent graduates of the foster care system, DYFS contracts with only five agencies statewide to provide aftercare services. Together these agencies have fewer than 70 spaces for the approximately 800 young adults who age out of care each year. Likewise, despite passing the \$1 million per year Homeless Youth Act in 1999, New Jersey still has only 74 transitional housing placements statewide. (For more on two young foster care grads who have not received the independent living help they need, see p. 9.)

For its study, the coalition surveyed group homes, residential centers, and other private agencies funded by DYFS to house and work with youth in foster care and mental health treatment, as well as youth themselves. The agencies reported that the DYFS caseworkers responsible for overseeing youths’ care display “a disturbing lack of knowledge . . . regarding the existence of and availability of programs and services for adolescent foster youth.” As a result, “few youth had knowledge of existing services [to aid in transition], and a majority had never been provided assistance in accessing those services.”

Most youth “reported that they did not speak with their caseworker immediately before exiting the system,” the coalition reported. “Most stated that they only received a letter in the mail informing them of their discharge from the system.”

Without direct funding for independent living activities, youth-serving agencies are attempting on their own to meet the needs of adolescents, but with mixed success. Most agencies provide tutoring or study skills training to help young people complete high school or earn their GEDs, but only 18 percent provide tuition assistance for post-secondary education or

very encouraging, even relative to the peer group of other at-risk youth.”

## Almost half of all youth in homeless shelters across New Jersey—46 percent—had been in DYFS care the previous year, and 45 percent of New Jersey child care agencies responding to a survey reported that they knew of foster youth served in 2000 who experienced homelessness after leaving care.

training, and only 6 percent help youth with college applications. Likewise, most agencies work with youth on job readiness, but they provide only “minimal assistance” to help young people actually find jobs, the coalition found.

### THE BIG PICTURE

Sue Ryan agrees with the Garden State Coalition that many youth are being ill-served. “We have a lot of kids in DYFS placements who have needs that go well beyond DYFS resources,” she says. However, as executive director of Partners for Kids and Families, the lead agency in the initial test of New Jersey’s ambitious Children’s Initiative, Ryan is optimistic that help is on the way.

Serving youth in Burlington County, Ryan’s agency has taken over the care of 80 emotionally disturbed young people, including 32 youth between the ages of 16 and 21. Rather than assigning them to overworked DYFS caseworkers, Partners for Kids and Families creates a treatment team for each young person—made up of relatives and other caring adults, social service providers, plus the young people themselves—to develop an individualized plan for every participant. The teams can tap into an array of programs and services—everything from mental health treatment to mentoring to computer training to transitional housing—with most of the costs paid by Medicaid.

Ryan expects that enrollment will triple to 240 Burlington County youth by the end of 2002, and the Children’s Initiative is rapidly spreading to other counties. “It’s a remarkable partnership between the private providers and the state,” Ryan says, “and I’m confident that it’s going to work.”

Others in southern New Jersey share Ryan’s enthusiasm for the Children’s Initiative, if not all of her optimism. “We’re all moving in the right direction, and I don’t think we were moving in the right direction before,” says Marion Settle, who supervises Freddi Afflerbach as executive director of Crossroads, Inc. “But sometimes when you look at the big picture it can be depressing. So many of the kids don’t even get a shot. And they all deserve a shot.”

*Dick Mendel is the editor of ADVOCASEY.*

# REFORMING INDEPENDENT LIVING IN NEW JERSEY:

## A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

What will it take to correct the widespread weaknesses in New Jersey's independent living services? In September 2001, the Garden State Coalition for Youth and Family Concerns outlined a six-part plan.

# 1

**Provide a transition package with essential tools for self-sufficiency to all youth exiting care.** Modeled on a Wisconsin policy, this package would include: a driver's license and transportation assistance; a high school diploma, GED,

or continued enrollment in an education program; access to birth certificates, Social Security cards, and medical records; financial assistance for three months after exiting care; easier enrollment into Medicaid; and one year of aftercare counseling for all youth leaving care.

**Extend foster care eligibility up to age 21.**

Rather than continuing to extend care beyond age 18 only in rare cases and for very limited periods, New Jersey should emulate New York, Connecticut, and other states by allowing youth to remain in care until age 21.

# 2

**Provide 100 percent tuition reimbursement at state colleges, universities, and vocational programs, as well as grants to help youth pay for room and board while they study.** Higher education and post-secondary vocational training are increasingly vital for success in the labor market. Yet, without savings or family resources, too

# 3

few former foster youth participate. Currently, ten states offer tuition waivers for former foster children. Texas, Connecticut, and Massachusetts also provide grants to help youth with living expenses.

**Form specialized teams at DYFS to focus exclusively on adolescents.**

The coalition reported many complaints that DYFS caseworkers, who typically work with children of all ages, "lacked knowledge on the availability of programs and services [for independent living], and are

# 4

most often focused on the needs of younger kids in their caseloads." To correct this problem, the coalition recommended that New Jersey follow the lead of several states by developing specialized units for adolescents.

**Substantially increase transitional housing opportunities for youth aging out of care.**

Specifically, the coalition recommended a four-fold funding increase in the New Jersey Homeless Youth Act, enough to develop and support 200 transitional living placements statewide.

# 5

**Provide continuing training for caseworkers and foster parents who work with adolescents.**

The most critical needs, the coalition reported, are to ensure that staff members and foster parents understand the practical and developmental needs of youth making the transition to independence, and to educate them about programs and services available to support youth in transition.

# 6

Source: *Bridges to Independence: Improving Transitions to Adulthood for Youth Served by the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services* (Newark, NJ: Garden State Coalition for Youth and Family Concerns, Inc., 2001).





BY SUSAN KELLAM

## AN UNFINISHED BRIDGE TO INDEPENDENCE

Like the population it serves, L.A. County's ambitious campaign to assist foster teens celebrates successes but struggles to reach maturity.

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“**S**how the visitor around *your* apartment,” the social worker gently chided above the sound of airplanes starting their descent into Los Angeles International Airport. A young man sporting a head of tight black braids led the tour through a two-bedroom apartment in a mustard stucco duplex, revealing clean surfaces in the kitchen with a few stacked dishes in the sink, about what you would expect from a 19-year-old living on his own for the first time.

He opened the freezer and showed off a compartment packed with meats and other frozen foods. Only the bedroom suggested his transient past, or the child lurking inside the near-adult. Beside the coverlet thrown hastily over the single bed sat a pile of worn stuffed animals, eyes missing on some, noses askew on others.

This young man, and his apartment, are participants in the most ambitious social experiment ever undertaken in America to help foster care youth make a successful transition to independence and adulthood. The program, called Bridges to Independence, began in 1996—three years before Congress doubled the federal funding for independent living programs and required states to develop comprehensive plans for helping foster

care youth achieve self-sufficiency. Five years and more than \$20 million later, the program has served nearly 800 young people. It has also been the focus of a detailed evaluation, completed this year.

As states and localities struggle to fulfill the new federal mandate, the Los Angeles experience provides a unique window into the challenges facing our nation to help foster children make successful transitions to adulthood. Has Los Angeles County created a model for the nation? Has it discovered the key to ensuring positive outcomes for this vulnerable and often neglected population?

Not yet, it turns out, although L.A. County has made significant progress. Evaluation data and

interviews with program founders, participants, staff, and funders reveal that Bridges has substantially improved youths' success in securing stable housing and achieving self-sufficiency—perhaps the most powerful evidence ever produced to show that transitional housing and supportive services can improve life outcomes for foster care graduates.

However, program participants showed few gains in emotional well-being, and fewer than half continued to pursue higher education. Many of those placed into buildings occupied only by Bridges youth—rather than individual apartments in the community—complained that the program felt a lot like the group homes they resided in before leaving foster care. Also, the program declined to serve foster care youth with mental health needs or those on probation.

Along the way, leaders of the Bridges to Independence initiative have learned many lessons about what works and what doesn't for youth in transition. Polly C. Williams, president of United Friends of the Children (UFC), the private agency that oversees Bridges, put it succinctly when she said, "We're teenagers." In short, the program is exactly where its clients are: transitioning to adulthood.

### A LINGERING CRISIS

When the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released a national survey in 1991 tracking the success of teens after leaving foster care, the study found that only about half the youth had completed high school, a little less than half had jobs, and only 38 percent had maintained their jobs for at least one year. Even more alarming, just one in six was completely self-supporting, and 25 percent had been homeless for at least one night.

Nationwide, policymakers proved largely unmoved by these findings. Federal funding for independent living services—which began only in 1986—remained modest throughout the 1990s. Likewise, few states opted to invest substantially in efforts to assure success among the formerly abused, neglected, or abandoned youth in their custody.

In Los Angeles, by contrast, the statistics struck a chord. L.A. County is home to 58,000 foster children—about one out of every ten foster children in the entire nation. Nearly 1,000 youth age out of foster care in Los Angeles every year. The county Department of Children and Family Services estimates that another 100–150 youth run away from their temporary placements each year and don't return.

Los Angeles is also home to an active philanthropic community with deep concern for disadvantaged children. A committed cadre of L.A.'s public and private leaders got together in the early 1990s to tackle the youth homelessness problem. The group

The Los Angeles experience provides a unique window into the challenges facing our nation to help foster children make successful transitions to adulthood. Has Los Angeles County created a model for the nation? Has it discovered the key to ensuring positive outcomes for this vulnerable and often neglected population?

included some of Los Angeles' most prominent citizens: Nancy Daly Riordan, wife of former Mayor Richard Riordan and founder of UFC, which launched Bridges to Independence; Sandra Rudnick, UFC chair from 1993 until early 2001 and founder of the pilot program on which Bridges was built; and Patricia Curry, chair of the county Commission on Children and Families.

As chair of a county task force in the early 1990s, Curry forged a partnership with Peter Digre, then the director of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), to substantially expand the support system for youth emancipating from the foster care system. With funding from the 1986 federal independent living law, DCFS already offered a basic living skills curriculum of specialized workshops and experiential activities to 16- and 17-year-olds in foster

Nancy Daly Riordan, founder of United Friends of the Children (UFC), recalls a brainstorming session about what kinds of independent living services to provide: “Finally, this man stood up and said, ‘what good is any of this if they’re homeless when they leave?’”

care, although many youth did not participate. DCFS also provided financial incentives for completing high school, and financial aid counseling for college and post-secondary vocational training.

However, as of the early 1990s, L.A. County routinely set youth free as they turned 18, often without regard to their individual needs or circumstances. To remedy this situation, Digre mandated that DCFS retain youth in foster care until they had jobs or income, a place to live, and access to health care (or at least information about health care). Digre, who headed the agency from 1991–1999, bolstered efforts to secure college scholarships and other forms of financial aid, and he persuaded the county government to set aside jobs for youth exiting the child welfare system. At Curry’s urging, Digre also initiated a project to start young people planning for independence at age 14, rather than at 16. “Peter could have just said no,” Curry says. “But he didn’t.”

### HOUSING: THE CRITICAL MISSING PIECE

These commitments represented a big step forward in L.A. County’s support for foster teens, but not a cure-all. Curry, Riordan, Rudnick, and other community leaders knew that policy pronouncements from the top of DCFS did not always translate into action by overburdened caseworkers on the front line. Meanwhile, the county still provided little concrete help for emancipating foster teens with their most critical challenge: *housing*.

The 1986 independent living statute barred states and localities from spending federal funds on room and board for foster teens, and on its own L.A. County provided little transitional housing for teens exiting foster care, and little funding to help teens pay security deposits or first month’s rent on apartments of their own.

Riordan recalls a brainstorming session about what kinds of independent living services to provide: “Finally, this man stood up and said, ‘what good is any of this if they’re homeless when they leave?’”

Finding housing for these youth became a mission for Sandra Rudnick. She spotted a change in federal housing guidelines that extended eligibility for housing assistance to people leaving institutions and at risk of becoming homeless. Los Angeles’ emancipated youth fit that criterion, and in 1990, Rudnick and UFC opened a 20-bed pilot project. Then, after operating for five years, Rudnick and Riordan approached one of Los Angeles’ largest philanthropic funders, the Weingart Foundation, with a proposal to expand the effort dramatically. In 1996, UFC secured the \$10.7 million five-year grant (since extended to seven years) that launched Bridges to Independence.

UFC has continued to coordinate Bridges ever since. The initiative has also involved DCFS (which provides dedicated counselors), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (which has now provided 11 housing grants), and the L.A. County Community Development Commission (which has acquired apartment buildings and leased them to DCFS for Bridges residents).

With so many foster children requiring continued support after leaving county supervision at age 18, Digre says Bridges became “the heart and pulse” of everything Los Angeles did to assist youth after exiting the foster care system. In fact, Bridges to Independence turned L.A.’s independent living efforts into a national showcase. “There’s nothing like Bridges on this scale anywhere else in the country,” says Fred J. Ali, president of the Weingart Foundation. “That’s why we made a [multimillion dollar] seven-year commitment.”



**B**efore enrolling in the Bridges to Independence program, says Robert Zubia, “I knew how to survive on the streets, but I couldn’t survive in an apartment.” Without Bridges, Zubia says, he would still be working two minimum-wage jobs just to eat. Instead, he’s attending Pasadena City College and working as a youth advocate for an alumni support center serving other foster care grads. “Bridges is the best out there,” Zubia proclaims. “Period.”

## WHAT BRIDGES DOES

The core of the Bridges to Independence program is 237 beds in apartment units throughout L.A. County, generally in safe, multiethnic neighborhoods, that are reserved for 18- to 20-year-old recent graduates of the foster care system. Seventy percent of the beds are clustered inside apartment buildings leased from the county's Community Development Commission. The rest are scattered in conventional apartment buildings.

Young people come to the Bridges program through referrals from social workers or care providers, or

Most Bridges participants are on track for success ... 92 percent completed high school and 68 percent had participated in post-secondary education or training. Perhaps most significant, three-fourths of Bridges participants secured stable housing before exiting the program.

through self-referrals. To be admitted, youth must not require psychiatric medications, face active delinquency cases in juvenile court, or have histories of violence or chemical addictions. High-functioning college- and career-bound youth seldom apply, nor do youth who have the opportunity to move into a stable home with relatives, foster families, or close friends. Thus, the program is geared for a middle category of emancipated youth who can function without direct supervision, but who face imminent risk of homelessness and require additional support to achieve self-sufficiency.

Once accepted, each newcomer moves into a fully furnished, utilities-included apartment, and each is assigned to a DCFS caseworker. These social workers handle caseloads of 18–30 participants each, well below the standard of up to 50 youth carried by DCFS staff who work with foster children prior to emancipation. Participants receive \$200 per month

to buy groceries, and they get job search assistance, transportation support, health and dental information, and child care (if they need it).

In 1998, DCFS opened an Alumni Resource Center to enhance services for Bridges participants. Located in Culver City across the street from UFC's office, the drop-in center helps youth look for jobs and permanent housing, and it provides computer training, educational support and financial aid, crisis counseling, legal aid, and referrals to community resources. A Medi-Cal (California's Medicaid program) eligibility worker at the center helps foster care graduates access medical coverage available to them under California law.

All Bridges participants must hand over 25 percent their earnings each month, like a rent payment. This money is held in trust until they graduate from the program, at which point it is returned in a lump sum and typically applied to first-month's rent and a security deposit for a permanent residence. Participants must abide by strict rules: No alcohol, weapons, drugs, gangs, or guests after midnight. They are also required to work and to show up at weekly meetings with social workers.

Bridges offers this mix of housing and support for up to 18 months, with month-to-month extensions in special cases. The average stay in the program is about 12 months.

## ON TRACK FOR SUCCESS

Most Bridges participants are on track for success. Among 257 youth surveyed at the outset of the program, 92 percent completed high school by the time they left, 87 percent were working, and 68 percent had participated in post-secondary education or training.

Perhaps most significant, three-fourths of Bridges participants secured stable housing before they left the program—33 percent in their own apartments, 35 percent with roommates, and 7 percent in college dorms or military housing. This success stands in bright contrast to the homelessness and chronic housing instability afflicting many foster care graduates in Los Angeles County and nationwide.

Stephen Ryan Sanders, a graduate student at the University of Southern California (USC), compiled these data as part of his doctoral dissertation about the Bridges program. Sanders analyzed foster youth who had been supervised by DCFS; who had aged out of care between January 1, 1996, and December 31, 2000; and who had entered the Bridges program. Sanders interviewed youth when they started the program and again when they exited. He found that participants' average monthly income rose from \$348 to \$967, a nearly 300 percent rise. At program entrance, 69 percent had bank accounts and 65 percent held jobs. At exit, 83 percent banked and 87 percent worked.

“Bridges has taken kids with no place to live and showed that enriched housing can stabilize their lives and allow them to come away with jobs at double the minimum wage,” said Madeleine R. Stoner, the USC social work professor who supervised Sanders’ study.

### LESS SUCCESS ON MENTAL HEALTH, PREGNANCY, AND EDUCATION

Despite the tangible progress achieved by youth admitted into Bridges, the USC study found that the program “was not effective in increasing the self-esteem of participants.” In fact, the mental health of Bridges participants declined in three of four

## OUTCOMES FOR PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

	AT ENTRY	AT EXIT
AVERAGE MONTHLY INCOME	\$348	\$967
CURRENTLY EMPLOYED	65%	87%
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT (YEARS)	12.1	12.6
COMPLETED HIGH SCHOOL	88%	92%
SOME POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION	23%	68%
CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN EDUCATION (INCLUDING HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION OR GED TRAINING)	55%	45%
MAINTAINING A BANK ACCOUNT	69%	83%
SECURED STABLE HOUSING	N/A	77%

Data are derived from entrance and exit interviews as well as case records for 257 Bridges to Independence participants.

Source: Sanders, Steven Ryan, *Emancipated Foster Youth: A Study of Outcomes of Emancipated Foster Youth in a Transitional Housing Program*, Doctoral Dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School, University of Southern California, May 2001.

measures, Sanders found, including self-esteem and depression. Sanders recommended that mental health services be made a core element of all future transitional housing and transitional living programs.

“This was never a mental health program,” acknowledges Bridges founder Sandra Rudnick. “Now we’ve found out that these kids have more mental health needs than we originally anticipated.”

Last year, Bridges added a public health nurse to the staff after discovering that about 30 of the young females had become pregnant. The pregnancies also raised a larger issue for Bridges leaders: the benefits of scattered-site versus cluster housing. Some apartment buildings dedicated to the project, like Casa Esperanza in Whittier, have up to 40 beds supervised by three resident managers. Not only do the large buildings provide opportunities for cohabitation, but they also deny participants a sense of adult independence.

Bonnie Armstrong, regional director of Casey Family Programs, a national child welfare organization, says that paying attention to building size was one of the most critical lessons learned in Bridges. “Four units max in the same building,” she advises for transitional housing programs. “You don’t want to recreate anything like the group home experience. Kids need to be more out in the world.”

Bridges’ founders and staff members also acknowledge that the program has not encouraged many participants to pursue higher education. Although 68 percent participated in some form of continuing education or training before leaving the program, Sanders found, only 45 percent were still enrolled at the time of exit. As a result, overall educational attainment increased only slightly. “Youth education did not appear to be strongly supported,” his evaluation concluded.

Despite these limitations, Bridges to Independence has proved an invaluable lifeline for young people. Robert Zubia, who slept in L.A.’s Lafayette Park when he was 9 years old, figured out how to steal food from movie studio trailers set up during production of *White Men Can’t Jump*. Yet Zubia lacked the wherewithal to live independently when he aged out of foster care. He got into the Bridges program at his social worker’s urging. “I knew how to survive on the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24

## FOR MANY NEEDY

While Bridges to Independence has helped hundreds of foster care graduates make the transition to adult life with stable housing and gainful employment over the last five years, the program has never served many of the teens in L.A. County most in need.

Early on, designers of the project elected to focus on youth with a high likelihood of success. For instance, 88 percent of Bridges participants entered the program having already earned a high school degree, evaluator Steven Ryan Sanders found, far above the 54 percent average among youth exiting DCFS care. Bonnie Armstrong, a consultant in Pasadena at the time of Bridges’ formation and now regional director for Casey Family Programs, explains that the Bridges partners “were starting from ground zero, and they knew they needed successes to make the program real.”

“Not all kids coming out of care had the same needs. [Bridges] defined what part of that continuum they could take on and would make sense at the time,” Armstrong reflects. “That it now looks like it isn’t meeting everyone’s needs means we all need to pitch in.”

Today, even Bridges’ supporters and partners are restless to extend its reach to youth with greater needs. Fred Ali, president of the Weingart Foundation, complains that county social workers, who decide which young people are admitted into Bridges transitional housing, screen out youth with severe depression or other mental health problems. These kids come right out of the county foster care system, he says. “Why has this [mental health problem] not been screened and treated before.”

# YOUTH, STILL NO BRIDGE AT ALL

Last year, Weingart awarded a \$100,000 grant to the Sycamores, a private residential treatment center in Pasadena, to provide transitional housing and independent living support for emotionally disturbed youth who are leaving the foster care system.

In addition, DCFS recently contracted with the county Department of Mental Health to establish 46 more transitional housing beds for youth with extreme needs, and Bridges itself has opened a facility, Cylmar House, for youth with mental health needs. The program is expensive, says UFC President Polly Williams, but “we’re starting to see some real success there and see kids getting ready to transition into a regular housing program and begin living by themselves.” Unfortunately, Cylmar has only six beds.

Yet, even if they were in foster care when they committed their offenses, these youth are not eligible for Bridges because they fall under the purview of the county’s probation department, not DCFS, and only DCFS youth get channeled into Bridges.

Berisha Black ran away several times from foster families as a teenager. She got fed up with a system that she believes destroyed her older sister and kept her for 16 years in mostly unresponsive homes. Yet Black was among the first admitted into Bridges in 1996. Now a coordinator for the California Youth Connection, Black graduated from California State University in 2001 and intends to earn a master’s degree in social work.

**88% of Bridges participants entered the program having already earned a high school degree, far above the 54 percent average among youth exiting DCFS care.**

Bridges to Independence has also screened out youth under the supervision of L.A. County’s probation department. Each year the probation department releases 500 nonserious juvenile offenders from group homes, correctional camps, and other programs and facilities. DCFS officials estimate that 200 of these probation youth would be strong candidates for transitional living programs. Some are guilty only of chronic truancy or running away from home repeatedly; others have committed misdemeanors or nonviolent felonies. An alarming number from both groups have spent all or most of their lives in the child welfare system, and many don’t have relatives willing to take them in.

If Black could benefit from transitional housing, why wouldn’t a child who ran away from her birth parents rather than her foster parents, or a young person who was once caught stealing a car or selling drugs?

In fact, Patricia Curry, chair of the L.A. County Commission on Children and Families, argues that including more young people would be a boon for the Bridges program. Widening the eligibility criteria for Bridges would allow L.A. County to better coordinate several pots of public money, she says. It would allow Bridges to tap into the dollars appropriated for mental health and probation, and it would help the program to meet the needs of more youth. “We’re just barely getting started,” Curry says.

After five years on the job, United Friends of the Children and its Bridges to Independence partners are both proud of the program's accomplishments and busy addressing its shortcomings.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 22

streets, but I couldn't survive in an apartment," Zubia admits.

Bridges wasn't a panacea: Social workers encouraged Zubia to work rather than enter college full time on a possible sports scholarship. He clashed with his first roommate, so Zubia moved, and his girlfriend got pregnant. Yet Zubia admits that, without Bridges, he probably would still be working two minimum-wage jobs just to eat. Instead, he's attending Pasadena City College and working as a youth advocate at the Pasadena Alumni Support Center. "Bridges is the best out there," he says. "Period."

### AT A CROSSROADS

After five years on the job, United Friends of the Children and its partners in the Bridges to Independence experiment are both proud of the program's accomplishments and busy addressing its shortcomings. Leaders are also searching for opportunities to broaden eligibility for the program to include those—such as youth with mental health problems, and those supervised by the county probation agency—who have thus far been excluded. (See "For Many Needy Youth, Still No Bridge At All" on p. 22.)

If they want to sustain Los Angeles County's stature as a national leader on independent living for foster care youth, public- and private-sector leaders know they will have to work together more closely—building on the foundation of Bridges to Independence to meet the needs of more youth, more effectively.

Board members at UFC are developing a five-year strategic plan to sustain Bridges after the Weingart Foundation grant expires in 2003. Although the

discussions are private, some UFC leaders still harbor a hope that the Weingart Foundation will support a major renewal grant. But Weingart President Fred Ali says that won't happen. Others hope that DCFS will allocate federal independent living funds directly to UFC for continuing support of Bridges. UFC is also considering strategies to partner with other county agencies, such as probation and mental health, to enroll

more youth into the program and attract more public funding. A fundraising campaign seeking other private money is also under way.

Likewise, the Department of Children and Family Services is struggling to devise a strategy that integrates Bridges and other projects into the coherent plan required by the new federal independent living law adopted two years ago. The county's federal allocation for independent living programs has grown since 1999 from \$11 million to \$18 million per year. But Anita M. Bock, DCFS director for the past two years, admits that the changes in federal law and the rapid growth of the budget have thus far "outstripped the agency's ability to handle [the challenge]."

Although Bock acknowledges the success of Bridges, developed before she took over at DCFS, she views the program as "a Cadillac service" that is heavily dependent on public funds. Bock hopes to target youth much earlier in their development with a matrix of life skills, job readiness, academic support, and mental health counseling services, so they will be better prepared for independence before they turn 18.

Still, says Addie Love, DCFS emancipation chief, transitional housing remains a key ingredient in the county's plans. "Expanding in this area is paramount," she says. The county is already taking advantage of provisions in the new federal law that allow room-and-board assistance, Love reports, helping 176 youth in the first six months of 2001 with security deposits, rent and utilities, and grocery bills. DCFS has also applied for more than one hundred Section 8 housing vouchers that would allow departing 18-year-olds to find their own apartments at substantially reduced rent. Soon, Bock and Love will sit down

with UFC and other Bridges partners to discuss the future of L.A. County’s programs for foster teens in transition.

## GROWING UP

Giving young people the wherewithal—the smarts—to make choices that put them ahead in life has been the focus of the Bridges program for the past six years. In doing this work, Bridges’ founders and partners have acquired some street smarts too. “Every time you’re on the cutting edge you find out a few things,” says Bonnie Armstrong.

Despite the daunting tasks ahead, Nancy Daly Riordan says she is “more committed than ever” to improving the lives of these adolescents without families. “We’re in the midst of a very exciting forward-moving transition.”

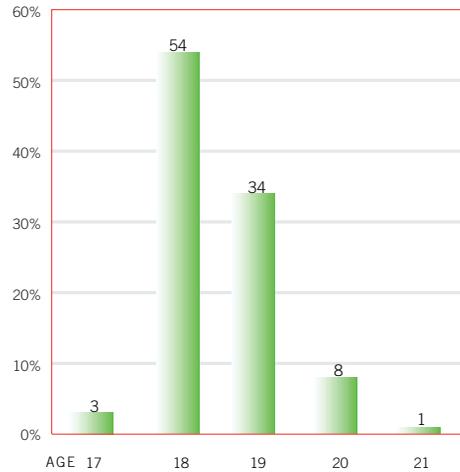
“We’re thrilled about taking this incredible program to the next level,” says Erin Mulcahy Stein, the current UFC chair. “Maybe we’ll never be finished,” says Patricia Curry. “We’ll just keep striving to be better.”

*Susan Kellam is currently a freelance writer. Previously, she held editorial positions at Rolling Stone and Congressional Quarterly, and she served as communications director for the American Public Welfare Association.*

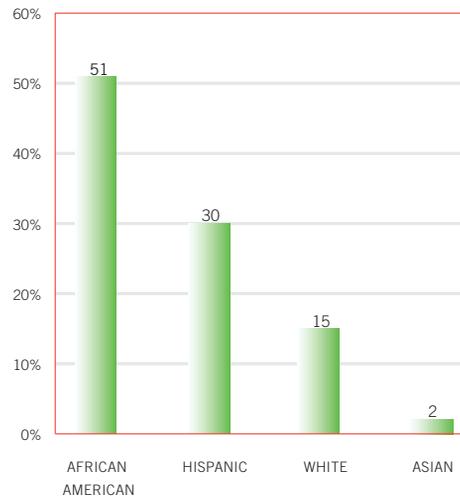
## WHO’S AGING OUT?

A PROFILE OF YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE IN LOS ANGELES, 1996

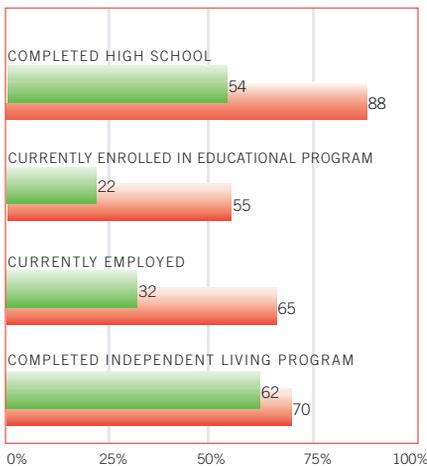
### age



### race



### education/employment



710 foster children who emancipated from foster care in Los Angeles County in 1996

257 youth enrolled in Bridges to Independence from 1996 to 1999

Source: Sanders, Steven Ryan, *Emancipated Foster Youth: A Study of Outcomes of Emancipated Foster Youth in a Transitional Housing Program*, Doctoral Dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School, University of Southern California, May 2001.

# Who Else is Making a Difference for Foster

## COMMUNITY TRANSITION SERVICES CENTER

Where can current and former foster youth go to seek answers, access services, and gain the skills they will need to succeed in the adult world? In most communities, there is no single site. Instead, youth and foster parents must navigate a maze of agencies and service providers.

In San Antonio and surrounding Bexar County, the Community Transition Services Center offers “a home base for youth who don’t have a home or adult guides to help them through this period and answer their questions,” says Scott Ackerson, the center’s coordinator.

The center was launched last year by Casey Family Programs, a national operating foundation dedicated to serving foster children, in partnership with community groups. The center serves as a central intake point for Bexar County youth ages 14–21 who have been in the child welfare system. Working with Baptist Children’s Home Ministries, a local youth-serving agency, it provides preparation for adult living training for 250–300 adolescents each year, as well as personalized planning and case management for 150 older youth and young adults.

The Transition Center offers youth an array of helpful services:

- employment assistance, including resume writing, job search assistance, and vocational coaching;
- career development through Project Quest, an intensive career planning and counseling program that helps young adults identify and train for gainful careers;
- community college enrollment, through an on-site counselor from Alamo Community College who assists youth with applications, financial aid, and placement into the college’s programs;
- transitional housing, including \$109,000 per year in federal independent living funds for room and board and access to 18 beds set aside for youth in the community; and
- peer support and advocacy through an alumni outreach effort staffed by recent foster care graduates and frequent peer group meetings at the center.

As Ackerson says, it’s “one-stop shopping for a whole continuum of services.”

# SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

# CINCINNATI, OHIO

### LIGHTHOUSE YOUTH SERVICES

For more than a decade, Lighthouse has been providing transitional housing for young people in and around Cincinnati, offering youth the opportunity to learn by doing.

Before entering the program, each applicant completes a 13-unit life skills training curriculum. Once youth move into apartments, Lighthouse pays the security deposit, rent, utilities, phone bills, and furnishings, along with a \$60 per month living allowance. Lighthouse also provides counseling (at least weekly) and help finding jobs, earning GEDs, applying for college, and meeting other needs. The program, which is funded with county taxes, serves 50–55 young people, who stay an average of 11 months.

Mark Kroner, director of independent living programs for Lighthouse Youth Services, believes two factors have made his program a national leader in transitional housing. First, because Lighthouse operates a variety

of group homes, foster homes, and shelter facilities for youth. “We basically never kick them out of the program,” Kroner says. “We just move them to a more structured setting until they pick up the slack a little bit.”

Second, rather than maintain apartment buildings or homes where youth are surrounded by peers in identical circumstances, Lighthouse places youth in apartments scattered throughout the community. “When youth live by themselves they cannot blame anybody else when something goes wrong in a place,” Kroner says. “They have to own it.”

The scattered-site approach also allows youth to live near their jobs or schools, rather than moving to a central location, and it gives youth the option to remain in their apartments permanently. “If they live in a group setting, when they complete the program they have to move again,” Kroner says. “We want our kids to already be where they’re going to be.”

# BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

## THE UPS SCHOOL-TO-CAREER PARTNERSHIP

A steady job at a living wage with benefits—a dream come true for most youth making the transition out of foster care, even without transportation assistance, counseling support, and tuition reimbursement for continuing education and training.

That dream is exactly what foster youth in the Baltimore area have been offered the past three years, thanks to a partnership involving United Parcel Service, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Maryland Department of Human Resources, and the Living Classrooms Foundation, a local youth agency. Applicants must complete work readiness training and demonstrate preparedness. Most are then referred for interviews at the UPS shipping facility in Burtonsville, Maryland. (In some cases, participants are referred to Marriott Hotels, which recently signed on as a second employer partner.)

At UPS, participants work part-time (15 to 25 hours per week) for \$8.50 to \$9.50 per hour plus health benefits. UPS also reimburses youth for tuition at colleges or vocational training programs, and it has hired a counselor to assist foster care youth on the job. Living Classrooms shuttles youth to and from work, and counselors visit up to three times each week to check on youth at the worksite.

Last year, UPS hired 42 foster care youth into the program. Remarkably, the youth averaged twice as long with the company as other entry-level employees. UPS hired another 38 youth in the first eight months of this year, and again the youth are demonstrating better retention than other UPS workers, thus saving the company money. (UPS spends \$1,400 to \$1,500 to recruit and hire each new worker.) In addition, 16 percent of youth hired this year earned promotions or raises by August.

UPS and the Annie E. Casey Foundation recently agreed to introduce similar projects in seven additional cities, which will bring the dream to hundreds more young people in the coming years.

“The only reason

## CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

When Congress established the Chafee Independent Living Program in 1999, it required states—for the first time—to develop comprehensive long-range plans to assist youth in the transition out of foster care. The plans, which were due on June 30, 2001, presented a substantial challenge to many states.

Connecticut already had a plan. In fact, Connecticut already had a comprehensive array of independent living programs with a collective annual budget of \$17.4 million. The state provides medical coverage for current and former foster youth up to age 21, 100 percent tuition reimbursement for college and vocational training, and continued financial support up to age 23 (for those who remain full-time students).

At age 14, the state assigns most youth in care to specialized caseworkers who work only with adolescents. Young people work with their caseworkers to begin setting goals, and those living with foster families undertake life skills training using an experiential curriculum designed with input from youth themselves.

Youth in residential treatment—who often have serious mental health issues—move into transitional living homes for the 18- to 24-month Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program.

After they complete the life skills training or PAL and turn 17, participants are eligible for the state's 180-bed transitional housing program. To take part, youth must be enrolled in school and working, and they must agree to place 50 percent of their income into savings. This savings requirement, reports Independent Living Coordinator Bill Pinto, enables participants to exit the program with an average nest egg of \$3,500—a crucial cushion for a population prone to crises and unexpected setbacks.

Pinto, who has overseen Connecticut's programs for 13 years, says that creating specialized teams to work with adolescents has been critical. "When we survey youth, which we do all the time, they rate their relationship with that caseworker as the number one thing," Pinto says. "The only reason we've gotten anywhere is because we've allowed the kids to lead us."

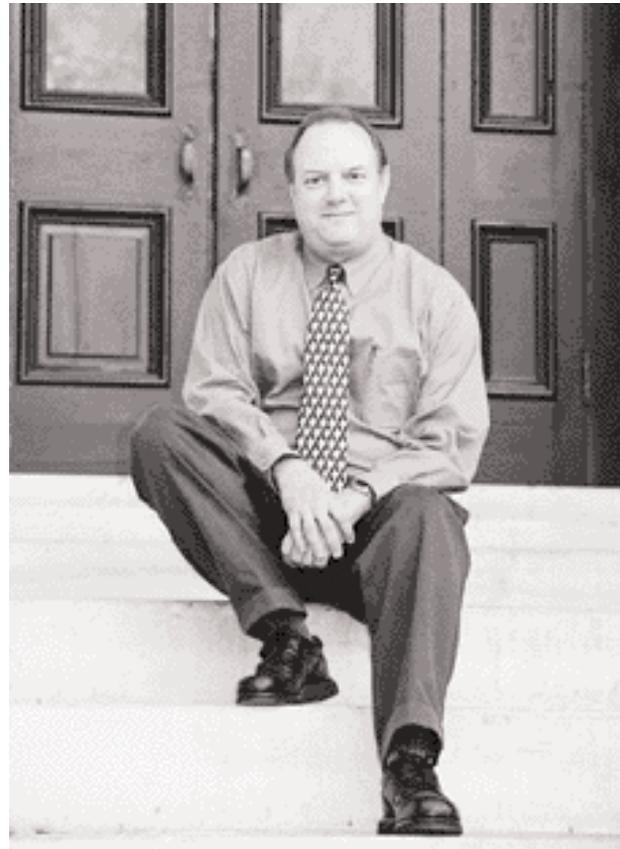
# CONNECTICUT

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CONNECTICUT INDEPENDENT LIVING COORDINATOR BILL PINTO

# WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

On June 14, 2001, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs committed \$18 million toward the formation of the **Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative** — a national, multiyear enterprise to support the development of effective policies and practices to help adolescents in foster care make successful transitions into adulthood. In late July, ADVOCASEY spoke with Gary Stangler, the former secretary of the Missouri Department of Social Services, who serves as the initiative's director.



## An Interview

ADVOCASEY: *Why is the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative being launched? What problems are you trying to solve?*

STANGLER: The population of youth in foster care, those about to leave foster care and those who recently left, constitutes a special group in our society. The state has taken these youths away from their families. We are legally the parents of these youth, yet we don't as a society treat these youths like we treat our own kids. There's no question that the outcomes for these youths are not very encouraging, even relative to the peer group of other at-risk youth.

When my kids were freshmen in high school, I was talking with them about the SAT and what that meant in their careers. With a lot of youth in foster care, there's often nobody offering this kind of preparation. Compounding the problem is the highly fragmented set of systems that are supposed to support young people emerging from foster care. Today, there's not good preparation to help children in foster care understand the choices they are making, or to let them know about all the opportunities available to them for housing, health coverage, college, job training, or employment. There's not even a road map to help youth find the services and information they will inevitably need on their journey to independence.

ADVOCASEY: *Why is now the right time to launch the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative?*

STANGLER: Thanks to the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act and the Chafee Program in 1999, the 50 states are beginning to focus policy attention on this population, and they are attempting to draw on the resources of state agencies and local communities to expand the services provided to adolescents in care. All of this attention and effort makes now an auspicious time for the Jim Casey Initiative to make a contribution.

STANGLER: The jury is out on that. States are just now submitting their plans to the federal Department of Health and Human Services. While there have been federal independent living funds since the mid-1980s, these programs have not been a high priority. Having run a state child welfare system for over a decade, I know that independent living is not what consumes your time. You spend most of your time on child protection, trying to minimize the number of times that children are badly hurt and become a matter of public concern. Now for the first time, states must have a five-year plan for independent living. For the first time, states have to give some thoughtful consideration in a longer term context for how they deal with this population.

ADVOCASEY: *Is the Foster Care Independence Act likely to solve the problem? Will it enable states and communities to meet the needs of foster teens striving for independence?*

STANGLER: I think we're far past the time, if we were ever in a time, when a single funding stream can resolve any complex social problem. Think of how we deal with our own children. We don't just say, well good, they're in school so I'm done raising my kid. No, you're thinking about schooling, you're thinking about what future occupational prospects they might have, you're thinking about their safety, you're thinking about the kids they hang out with, you're thinking about their social support networks. As a parent you're thinking about all those things. So a single funding stream is not going to be enough to really address the problem.

So far as the planning mandated under Chafee, I've written a lot of state plans in my career saying that we're going to be comprehensive, holistic. Plans are great, but it's the execution of the plan and the allocation of resources that will really tell you whether a state is serious and whether there's some cohesion to its plans.

ADVOCASEY: *Is that where the Jim Casey Initiative comes in?*

STANGLER: Yes, that's one place where we would like to be. Our added value will be in helping inform the allocation of resources in states and at the community level.

# with Gary Stangler

ADVOCASEY: *Through the Chafee Program, Congress doubled federal spending on independent living assistance and required states to develop comprehensive plans. How effectively are the states implementing the new law?*

For example, if the state is going to put a lot of its money into housing and helping kids in their transition by supporting their rents or security deposits or furnishings, then what are the collateral supports for finishing high school, getting post-secondary education, getting and keeping a job that are going to allow that to be successful?

ADVOCASEY: Will the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative promote specific models for assisting youth in transition, or will you try to help states and localities figure out what they need and what's going to work for them?

STANGLER: We will be more focused on helping communities and states figure out what works in their own jurisdictions. We may identify some best practices, but we are not going to market those practices aggressively. For us, it is more a matter of what this practice looks like in a multistakeholder environment, when you bring the relevant interests together to address interrelated needs around jobs and schooling and safety and housing and health care, and around helping youth build stable and supportive relationships. Working collaboratively is not what government, with all of its separate funding streams, does well.

We spend a lot of time talking about the importance of relationships for youth. But there is no program that provides relationships to a young person. We think it is important to help states and communities create the environments in which youth have opportunities to develop trusting relationships with their peers and with caring adults.

We will also be encouraging states and communities to engage young people not only in planning their own futures, but also in helping guide policy decisions that allocate services and resources for independent living. The real partnership is with youth, and we have to learn more about empowering youth in this process.

ADVOCASEY: The Jim Casey Initiative is going to be a grant-making project. Should people in the field be sending you proposals and letters of inquiry? Or will you go out yourselves and identify who's doing the best work and fund them to do more?

STANGLER: We are active in the marketplace of ideas and welcome ideas. However, we want to ask people in

the field to pull the necessary players together at the community level before they come to us. I'm not interested in funding program X unless program X is part of a collaborative partnership that brings the other stakeholders to the table.

ADVOCASEY: When all is said and done five or ten years from now, how will you know if the initiative has succeeded? What outcomes are you looking to achieve?

STANGLER: We'll be especially focused on outcomes in employment, education, and opportunities for youth to develop strong relationships with peers and supportive adults. We will develop a variety of submeasures under each of those categories. Also, if we help the states and communities we're working with develop good strategies and show success in improving the outcomes, then we'll also be looking at the policy impact. It's not going to be enough for us that we've got a really nice operation going in Atlanta. State government has to be a consistent and solid partner, too. We want to see more states expand their programming for this population, providing free college tuition and medical coverage to former foster youth, for instance. Those are going to be important indicators of success as well.

ADVOCASEY: On a personal level, how do you feel your career has prepared you for this assignment?

STANGLER: Probably the real answer is that I was appointed by a Republican, John Ashcroft, as director of social services in Missouri and then reappointed by a Democrat, Mel Carnahan. I've been a part, under Republican and Democratic governors, of trying to make the connection between state government programs and the communities where families actually live. We were attempting devolution before devolution became popular, and by devolution I mean actually sharing power and dispersing power. We found that when you are successful at doing this, you have a much greater chance at seeing outcomes improve for children and families. So that's one element of the experience that I bring to bear.

I also bring my experience as a parent. Probably the most rewarding part of raising my kids has been helping them through that transition period and teaching them what it means to be a real adult. It's not about whether you're

fourth on the salary scale or that you've got to go into computers because that's what everybody pays for. It's about coming out as good men and women with values that will contribute to a good society.

**ADVOCASEY:** *What do you anticipate will be your biggest challenge, and what do you think could be your greatest opportunity as you go forward?*

**STANGLER:** I have no illusions that this challenge will be easy. Adolescents are the hardest group in our society to bring favorable attention to. All around the country, you don't even hear the word "juvenile" unless it is attached to the word "crime." We're afraid of teenagers. They trouble us because they're hard to work with, to put up with. It's a hard time of life. It's a tough age for kids going through it, and it's a tough age for the adults who deal with them. It's hard to get favorable policy attention on these kids, but that challenge excites me.

**ADVOCASEY:** *Do you see evidence that policymakers are going to be receptive?*

**STANGLER:** I think so, but you've got to give it a little time first, because—at least in Washington—they think they solved it with the Chafee Program. I do think the idea resonates with people that kids need support and connections to make it from being a teenager to being an adult. Almost always when I talk to people about this, they intuitively understand that nobody makes it easily on their own. In my own state and other places where I've talked to legislators, the immediate reaction is we really should do more for those kids.

**ADVOCASEY:** *So you believe that if you make the case and help plant the seed for good programming, the resources and energy will follow?*

**STANGLER:** You can plant the seed, but you've got to nurture it. You've got to nurture it in the policy process, you've got to nurture it at the community level, and

you've got to nurture it at the program level. Because ideas are like trains: They come by every couple of minutes.

The real challenge, the more difficult challenge, is sustaining it, building public will, and nurturing things along. Everything militates against good ideas proceeding forward, because they involve multiple stakeholders. As soon as you turn your attention away, old habits creep back in and people start doing business the way they've always done it. So you've got to create that sustained attention. Too often foundations just plant seeds, watch them grow a little bit, and everybody says, "What really nice seeds we planted." But we don't stick around to water them over time.

That's what the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs have committed to doing with the Jim Casey Initiative, and that's why I'm so excited to begin.

**We are active in the marketplace of ideas and welcome ideas. However, we want to ask people in the field to pull the necessary players together at the community level before they come to us. I'm not interested in funding program X unless program X is part of a collaborative partnership that brings the other stakeholders to the table.**

*The offices of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative are located in St. Louis, Missouri. For more information, call 314-863-7000 or visit [www.jimcaseyouth.org](http://www.jimcaseyouth.org).*