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Foster Youth and the "Aging Out" Age in Rhode Island

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ABSTRACT

Foster care is a temporary placement of children and youth with others outside of their home due to child abuse or neglect. Since its 19th century origins, the foster care system has evolved to focus on three goals of providing safety, well-being, and permanency until the child leaves the system, either by reunification, adoption, or "aging out". Because these youth often "age out" without a home, job, or support system, programs such as the Life Skills Program and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative are working toward providing this population with skills that will assist them in successfully aging out of the system. The Young Adults Establishing Self-Sufficiency (YESS) Program, a pilot program designed to help youth who have aged out to establish self-sufficiency was the focus of this exploratory, qualitative study, designed to examine what older foster youth know about YESS and how they believe it will help them. Focusing on their knowledge of YESS, 11 older foster youths were interviewed in groups. It was found that those who knew about YESS are already enrolled or have taken steps to apply. Because of the perceived helpfulness of YESS, it is necessary that the social work profession develop and promote YESS and similar programs.

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PREFACE

In 2007, the state of Rhode Island made significant budget cuts from the services provided to foster care youths because of the growing budget deficit in the state. The General Assembly and Governor Donald Carcieri decided to cut $8.5 million dollars from the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) by forcing youths to "age out" of the foster care system at the age of 18 years old, rather than 21. This change left about 900 youths alone without services that help them establish their own self-sufficiency. It is imperative to realize the importance of permanency in the process of developing self-sufficiency for all youths. For most children to continue to properly grow and develop, they must have some sort of connection or permanency that helps to guides them through life. This connection also improves outcomes for the youths as they age out of the foster care system. Not having permanency can prevent them from learning social skills and life skills, such as budgeting or finding a job, which will hinder their transition into adulthood. Because of the necessity for permanence, it is urgent that this population of youths, no longer in DCYF care, is provided with other kinds of assistance to help them establish self-sufficiency.

Introduction

Foster care is the temporary placement of children and youth with others outside of their home due to child abuse or neglect ("Frequently Asked Questions", 2007). Children and youth enter the foster care system when their family has been reported to the state's department of child welfare for child abuse or neglect so severe that it threatens their immediate safety ("Foster Care DCYF", 2006). Children can enter the foster care system between the ages of birth and 18, from any social class and any culture. They are placed outside of the home in a range of different settings, varying from living with foster families to group homes to emergency shelters. The placement is done to ensure the safety and well-being of the child.

While children and youth are in these placements, a permanency goal is determined for them. Permanency goals are objectives which aim to provide the child with a safe, stable living environment and create a lifelong connection with a nurturing caregiver ("Glossary of Foster Care Terms," 2007; "Permanency Support Unit", 2007). Permanence should provide the foster youth with an enduring family relationship that offers continuous support throughout their life ("Defining Family Permanence", 2006).

Usually this goal is for reunification, which involves the family fixing those situations which led to the abuse or neglect so that the child can return home ("Foster Care DCYF", 2006). However, if those situations are not fixed for whatever reason and reunification cannot be achieved, there are other designated goals of guardianship and adoption. Guardianship is when another adult, usually a family member, legally agrees to provide support for the youth without terminating parental rights. Adoption is when the parents' rights are terminated and another adult legally agrees to support the youth as a

parent. The youth will remain in foster care until their permanency goal has been achieved.

For some foster youth, the goal of permanency is not met for a variety of reasons, and they exit the foster care system by "aging out". Foster youth generally are emancipated, or age out of the system, on their 18th birthday or when they graduate high school, whichever comes first. "Aging out" is the youth's independence from the foster care system, forced by the foster care system. Emancipated youth are expected to be financially independent, find their own housing, continue their education or find a stable job, along with many other responsibilities on the day they age out (Clinton, H., 1999). Essentially, they are expected to be full-functioning adults on their 18th birthday.

However, foster youth are often not provided ample education and training on how to fulfill these roles of autonomous adults. Because of the scarcity of money allotted to the foster care system which is divided between the focuses of safety, well-being, and permanency, there is little left for life skills training for foster teens on the verge of aging out ("Program Assessment," 2007). Without a basic understanding of how to manage money, rent an apartment, find a job, apply to college, among many other life basics, foster teens age out and must fend for themselves with very few resources.

While some foster teens continue to use former foster parents, group home workers, or other mentors as support systems, others are emancipated without a safe, nurturing relationship to rely upon. Without a mentor to guide them, many foster teens are lost and unprepared for this transition into the real world. Forcing foster youth out of care at age 18 does not support the permanency goal of providing them with a nurturing relationship. Their transition to becoming full-functioning adults is therefore hindered.

The challenge of leaving foster care with minimal preparation for adulthood and little support is difficult for foster teenagers to face. Confronting these obstacles can lead them astray, away from the life they may have planned for themselves. Almost half of foster alumni rely on government assistance and programs such as WIC, RIte Care, SSI, and Section 8 indicating that a lack of support for their independence forces them into government assistance programs (Bentley, 2006). Over 20% of the former foster child population was incarcerated in government funded prison systems at some point following their emancipation demonstrating that minimal preparation for adulthood leads to more foster alumni in the prison system (Bentley, 2006; Cusick &Courtney, 2007). A significant part of the foster alumni population continues to utilize the government's funding after they have left the foster care system. Although forcing foster youth to "age out" at age 18 may appear to be government savings, it is actually a shifting of costs from the departments of child welfare to other government assistance programs.

This 18th birthday deadline creates additional challenges for the foster teen already struggling with adolescent transitions. Because foster youth are emancipated on their 18th birthday, some are literally kicked out of their foster placement the night of their birthday. This may fall in the middle of their senior year of high school and yet they are still forced to find their own income and housing: sleeping in subway stations or emergency rooms (Clinton, H., 1999). More than 20,000 children age out of the system every year in the United States ("Facts on Foster Care," 2006).

In 1999, President Bill Clinton attempted to provide some financial support to states by helping to pass the Foster Care Independence Act (HR 3443). The Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) agreed to provide financial support for states if they chose to,

in turn, support foster youth past their 18th birthday. Through the FCIA, states are allowed to continue to support motivated foster alumni until they turn 21 through approved programs. It "expands access to health care, education, housing and counseling for young people who must leave foster care when they turn 18" (Clinton, W., 1999).

This support has been accepted by seventeen states including Iowa, Maine, and Illinois ("State by State," 2007). It, along with other supportive programs, has produced positive results, increasing education levels and decreasing criminal justice involvement (Courtney, 2007; Bentley, 2006). However, due to budgetary concerns in Rhode Island, Governor Carcieri has proposed that Rhode Island lower the age of state support from 21 to 18 cutting off 900 foster care alumni from services, allowing Rhode Island to reduce its present spending (Bentley, 2006).

Because of the correlation between unprepared foster youths and increased involvement with the prison system and dependence on government-run social programs, it is necessary for social workers to examine the social and financial advantages and disadvantages to such a proposal. It is the mission of social workers to "enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" ("NASW Code of Ethics", 1999). The populations of foster alumni and foster youth are vulnerable and oppressed in their inability to fight these budgetary cuts. The Rhode Island Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers has recognized the vulnerability of these populations and is taking action against the lowering of the "aging out" age from 21 to 18 based on that premise.

The Foster Care System

Foster care has its roots in the Placing Out System during the 19th century in which children were moved to farms in the Midwest to work on family farms ("Adoption History", 2007; "Foundation Training", 1999). The founder of placing out, Charles Loring Brace, shared a concern with other city dwellers for the increasing numbers of vagrant children living on the streets ("Foundation Training", 1999). Rather than overcrowd orphanages, these children could be productive towards society by helping the farmers out. "Clearly, the children were viewed as a resource to meet the needs of foster families; that the reverse occurred was of secondary importance. In effect, foster care began as a form of indentured servitude" ("Foundation Training", 1999).

As it became more evident that placing out was not meeting the needs of the youths, reforms were made to more effectively place vagrant children. Charles Birtwell and the Boston Children's Aid Society started to modify the placement methods by taking the child's individual needs into consideration ("Foundation Training", 1999). His practice, beginning in 1886, also encouraged the reimbursement of foster families for their expenses. Henry Dwight Chapin, another reformer, encouraged the movement away from orphanages towards foster homes in the early 20th century. His research asserted that "a poor home is often better than a good institution" ("Adoption History", 2007).

Over time foster care became a temporary home which could be provided as assistance for families in need. As social advocates started to notice the psychological damages that could result from bouncing between temporary placements, social policy began to follow. In the Child Welfare Reform Act of 1980, development and regular reviewing of case plans, case tracking, and preventative services were required of states

to receive federal foster care funding ("Foundation Training", 1999). Foster care was

developing into what is currently recognized as the foster care system.

Since children cannot remain in the care of the state forever, they must eventually

leave the foster care system. Being displaced from the foster care system is more

commonly known as "aging out." In the current foster care system, the aging out age

varies depending on the state guidelines. Generally, it ranges from 18 to 21 years old. In

2007, the aging out age in Rhode Island was lowered from 21 to 18.

In order for a child to age out of the foster care system, they must first enter into

it. A child enters the foster care system through the state child welfare agency. In Rhode

Island, this agency is the Department of Children Youth and Families (DCYF).

Generally, a case will be reported to the state child welfare agency with concerns of child

maltreatment. Child maltreatment is defined by Federal law as

> serious harm (neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse or
> neglect) caused to children by parents or primary caregivers, such as extended
> family members or babysitters. Child maltreatment also can include harm that a
> caregiver *allows* to happen or does not *prevent* from happening to a child.
> ("How Does the Child Welfare System Work?", 2006)

A case reported to DCYF will be investigated and acted upon depending on the

legitimacy of the report and the severity of the maltreatment. The risk of the

maltreatment is assessed; if the child is seriously harmed or at high risk of being seriously

harmed, then he or she will be removed from the house and placed with a relative or in

other forms of foster care such as foster homes, shelters, or group homes. This child is

then in the care of the state and is in the foster care system.

There is no typical foster child; they come from a variety of cultures, family

structures, and classes. However, children who enter the foster care system have

"emotional, behavioral, developmental, and health problems that reflect the difficult family and environmental circumstances that caused them to be removed from their homes in the first place" ("Troubled Lives, Troubling Prospects", 2002). In the United States, there are approximately 500,000 children currently in the foster care system. Rhode Island had 3,311 children under the age of 21 in the foster care system as of December 31, 2006 (RI Kids Count Fact Book, 2007).

Goals of the Foster Care System

The foster care system has three main goals for the youth that enter the system: safety, well-being, and permanency. Ensuring safety protects the child physically. Protecting their well-being safeguards the child psychologically. Providing permanency gives the child opportunities to develop lifelong connections with those who can properly provide for the child ("Families For Life", 2006). These three goals are viewed as obligatory duties of parents, and thus should be provided for by the state: the child's new "parent." Since the children who enter the foster care system are often removed from their families under harmful conditions, the initial focus of the foster care system is often on protecting their safety and well-being.

As the safety and well-being of the child become primary concerns, permanency becomes a secondary concern. Upon entry into the foster care system, a permanency goal is usually determined for the youth. Permanency cannot be immediately addressed nor quickly fixed, but requires time and effort to develop. It allows for a connection between the foster youth and an adult to develop. Although it is a time consuming process and often pushed to the back burner, its presence, or lack thereof, deeply impacts the youths for the rest of their lives.

Children often enter the foster care system feeling abandoned and alone. While their initial needs to be safe are addressed, they may still have this feeling of abandonment which can interfere with future relationships. Although it is the hope that all foster placements would be able to create productive relationships with the child, it is more realistic to expect that foster youths will connect with a placement that fits them. It is this connection that allows for permanency to develop. For most children to continue to properly grow and develop, they must have some sort of connection that guides them through life ("Families For Life", 2006). This connection also improves outcomes for the youths as they age out of the foster care system.

These connections are often found in one of the three permanency goals of the foster care system. Generally, the permanency goal is initially reunification ("How Does the Child Welfare System Work?", 2006). If a family is able to fix the problem that led to the removal of the child, then the child is allowed to return to live with their family. However, these solutions may never happen or reveal themselves to be temporary. If the family is reported again, the child will be removed and reenter the foster care system. If reunification is determined to be unattainable, then the goal will be changed to guardianship, adoption, or independent living ("How Does the Child Welfare System Work?", 2006).

Guardianship is the permanent placement of a child with a relative or other caregiver when termination of parental rights is not in the best interests of the child ("Guardianship as a Permanency Option", 2007). Guardianship allows the child to stay with adults that they already have relationships with. The hope is that these existing relationships will encourage permanency for the child. Adoption is the permanent

placement of a youth with a family that includes the termination of parental rights. Relationships or, at minimum, meetings are encouraged to help build permanency for the child.

Often times when children are getting older and their chances of being adopted are waning, the goal of independent living is offered. Independent living provides foster youths with apartments of their own. Entering independent living often indicates that the foster youth does not have much permanency in their lives. "A service plan goal of 'independent living' or 'another planned permanent living arrangement' does not mean a youth no longer needs family permanency, but that the system does not succeed in achieving it for or with them" (Frey, Greenblatt & Brown, 2005). They are also, usually, on the edge of aging out when permanency is needed most. If permanency is not achieved, they will age out with no connections.

However, determining a permanency goal does not immediately indicate its achievement. Rather, it takes time for any of these permanency goals to be achieved. While they are waiting, the foster youth is in foster care placements, such as with foster parents, in group homes or shelters. It is in these foster care placements that connections and permanency are lacking. However, because many of the older foster youths age out without realizing their permanency goal, they are still lacking the permanency that is often necessary for a successful transition to adulthood.

"Aging Out" of the Foster Care System

"Aging out" of the foster care system implies that the youth is no longer provided any of the services that they received while in foster care. This includes shelter, food, clothing, and medical insurance, among many other services. By cutting these services

off to foster youth, the state is implying that they expect the foster youths to be able to fully provide for themselves. It is expected that a youth who has aged out of the system will be able to secure a steady job, find and pay for housing, and continue their education, as well as many other expectations.

At the age of 18, the youths of the United States are generally in their senior year of high school, preparing for graduation. Once they age out, foster young adults are expected to adjust to fulfilling all these adult tasks as well as continue with their high school education. In her remarks at the signing of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, Hillary Rodham Clinton shared stories of foster alumni she had met with. One aged out in the middle of her senior year of high school and was forced to live with friends, in metro terminals, and even in emergency rooms (Clinton, H., 1999). It is this sudden cutting off with no supports that leaves foster youth unprepared.

While these adulthood expectations seem reasonable for a full-functioning adult, it takes experience and support to be able to achieve them.

> Many youth in foster care do not benefit from normal growing-up experiences, such as holding down a part-time job, watching a parent balance a checkbook or learning the meaning of household responsibility by performing daily chores. Without basic life skills, youth who leave foster care often have difficulty negotiating more complex tasks like finding safe housing, getting and keeping a steady job, staying healthy and avoiding financial or legal trouble... In fact, four years after leaving care, only one in five former foster youth is fully self-supporting. (Shirk & Strangler, 2004, as cited in Frey, Greenblatt & Brown, 2005)

Because young adults who age out of the foster care system often do not have permanency, which lends itself to assistance in these experiences, they do not have adults they can turn to with questions on how to navigate the adult world.

Having a permanent relationship with an adult who has experienced adulthood lends itself to more support and preparation for the youth during this transition. In a

study of the adult functioning of former foster youth in the Midwest, it was found that "closeness to at least one family member and general satisfaction with their experiences in out-of-home care increased the likelihood of employment or education for these young people" (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). This indicates the importance of relationships to the development of the former foster youth.

In another study on conditions of youth preparing to leave state care, youth were asked about the educational support services or training that they had received in areas such as money management, food preparation, personal hygiene and health, and finding housing, transportation, and employment (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004). Between one-third and one-half of the youth in the study had not received any service in a given service domain. These youth were lacking knowledge of basic life skills which can be taught with training or through a permanent relationship. These are the basic life skills necessary to transition from childhood into adulthood.

Approximately 20,000 children in the United States age out of the foster care system each year and attempt to make this transition. As of June 2005, almost a quarter of foster children ages 14 and older in Rhode Island were unlikely to achieve true permanency due to their permanency goal of "other planned permanent living arrangement" ("Building Better Lives", 2006). That is 362 young adults entering adulthood with little to no preparation for what they are about to experience.

Reliance on Government Funded Programs

These unprepared former foster children enter adulthood with no preparation or support for their life outside of the foster care system. Because they do not have the knowledge of how to live as an adult, they are likely to become dependent on the state

and federal government once they leave the foster care system. This lack of knowledge can lead to later struggles and a reliance on government funded programs.

Former foster youths who are not provided sufficient job training or education on how to search for a job are unlikely to be able to fully support themselves when they age out. A study of Wisconsin foster youths found that of those who exited the foster care system between 1995 and 1997, 21% were unemployed and 24% were sporadically employed in the two years following their exit from the foster care system (Dworsky & Courtney, 2000, as cited in Sherman, 2004). Not only did was there a high rate of unemployment, but those who were employed were earning, on average, lower than full-time minimum wage. Similar findings of low wages were found for foster alumni working in California, Illinois, and South Carolina (Goerge, Bilaver, Lee, Needell, Brookhart & Jackman, 2002, as cited in Sherman, 2004).

Because these foster youth are not receiving adequate job preparation before aging out, they are not fully prepared to find a job or steadily work. This lack of employment leads to an increased dependency on government assistance programs such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and food stamps which provide financial assistance to families who cannot financially support themselves. As the foster alumni population increases, it is inevitable that the population of former foster youths who are inadequately prepared to enter the work force will grow as well. The reliance of this population on government assistance programs will also grow unless effective preventative programs are implemented which would supply proper job education to foster youth while they are still in foster care.

There are also a significant number of foster youths and former foster youths who are involved with the criminal system. In a study by Cusick and Courtney (2007), it was found that "foster youth have higher levels of offending than their same-aged peers… [indicating] that this group is at high risk for both offending and criminal justice system involvement during the transition to adulthood." Because state and federal governments are involved in the funding of the criminal justice system, these higher levels of former foster youth in the criminal justice system indicate a substantial cost to the government.

The study determined that their findings could not provide evidence to support the proposition that these higher levels of offending were due to their placement experiences. However, it was suggested that involvement in the criminal justice system could also be due to other risk factors such as substance abuse, mental health and behavioral problems, and low educational progress (Cusick & Courtney, 2007). Foster children are often susceptible to these risk factors because of their involvement in the foster care system and an additional lack of permanency. This indicates that although it may not be directly influential in involvement with the criminal system, foster care does tend to carry with it other issues which, left unaddressed can lead to criminal involvement.

Ultimately, foster children who age out of the system at 18 with little or no supports are less likely to address these important issues on their own. Without a permanent adult figure in their lives to turn to, they are not fully prepared for the workforce and often times are involved with the criminal system. This creates a greater, future financial burden on the government to assist and support these former foster children.

Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and Other Opportunities

On December 14, 1999, President Clinton signed into law the Foster Care Independence Act to relieve states of some of the financial burden of foster care. Through this amendment of the Social Security Act, states were given more funding and flexibility to create programs with the goal of assisting foster youth in their transition into adulthood. The funding for the Title VI-E Independent Living Program was doubled from $70 million to $140 million. A portion of this additional funding is required to go to former foster youths between the ages of 18 and 21. States are also allowed to provide room and board, Medicaid, and savings assistance to this population through the Foster Care Independence Act.

There are other government programs that are making efforts to provide services to this population of former foster youth. The Family Unification Program, through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, offers housing assistance as well as aftercare to a youth who has aged out of the system. Their Youthbuild Program strives to provide "education, counseling, job training, and leadership development opportunities to unemployed and out-of-school youth between the ages of 16 and 24" (Sherman, 2004). Both of these programs' efforts are helping to support young adults in their transition into adulthood.

Private organizations have made efforts to support this transition as well. In Rhode Island, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative strives to provide the youth leaving foster care with assistance in becoming more financially literate, gaining experience with the banking system, and accumulating assets ("Rhode Island JCYOI", 2006). Their main program is the Opportunity Passport which provides them with a

savings account, a banking account, and opportunities within the community to make connections and build assets, as well as the knowledge and training to utilize these opportunities. In the first two years, 131 youths were enrolled in the program. It is programs such as this one which help foster youth to have a smoother transition out of foster care into adulthood.

Programs similar to these are of great assistance to youth who are aging out of the system without a permanent relationship. A national study found that youth who had received skill training in all of the five key areas – "money management, credit management, consumer skills, education, and employment – had significantly improved outcomes in their ability to live independently, when compared with those receiving no skill training in those areas" (Wertheimer, 2002). If a foster child does not have a permanent relationship to rely on, these programs and others similar to them can assist in providing the youth with the needed training. These programs can even supplement experiences that a foster child may have in their permanency placement.

Current State of Foster Care in Rhode Island

Before 2007, the state of Rhode Island provided services to foster youths up to the age of 21 in the form of Independent Living Programs, educational assistance, and numerous other programs. This assistance allowed for them to have a home and further their education, which they would not be able to afford on their own. It provided some continuity and assistance in their transition, thus helping them to become self-sufficient.

In the 2007 General Assembly, budget cuts were proposed due to a large budgetary deficit in Rhode Island. The Governor's budget proposal included a cut of $19 million from services to the 18-21 year old population of DCYF foster youths in budget

article 22 ("Legislative Wrap-Up", 2007). While the General Assembly only cut about

$8.5 million, this still was a significant enough to hinder the services that DCYF could

provide to this population.

Numerous child welfare advocates spoke up against these cuts, including Rhode

Island Kids Count, Rhode Island Foster Parents Association, Jim Casey Youth

Opportunities Initiative, and the National Association of Social Workers. Rick Harris,

the Executive Director of the Rhode Island chapter of NASW asserted in his testimony,

> If budget article 22 is allowed to pass, 857 children in state care will be cut from
> receiving any services. They will lose health care benefits, case-managing
> services, housing transitional services, and college tuition assistance. These cuts
> would leave many youngsters homeless and put them at greater risk for getting in
> trouble with the law. As a result, these cost cuts will not really be saving money,
> but will only be shifting money from transitional services and college education
> assistance to prison systems and homeless shelters. (Harris, 2007)

It is this testimony, among others, that were a step in the right direction. There is a need

to continue serving the 18-21 year old population of DCYF foster youths. Because they

are often not provided permanency in foster care, they must turn to other programs that

can provide them this support. These supports are necessary in order for the young adults

to become self-sufficient. If they are not taught how to be self-sufficient, many will

continue to rely on the government. In the long run, this will ultimately cost the

government more to support this population over the course of their lives.

The Family System

Families have traditionally been viewed as the means to raising children. The

function of families is not only to bring children into the world, but also to properly

encourage their development. This stems from a biological Darwinian view: in order for

the species of mankind to survive, they must be raised in a manner that encourages their

survival. It is only natural that parents, who bring the child into the world, would then be faced with the next task of assisting that child in growing up to have their own family. The survival of our species depends on it.

Over time, the family has lost some of its functions, such as the educational function as public schooling developed, the protective function as society turned to government for protection, and the religious function as daily devotions within the family decreased (Vincent, 1966). However, it is in this turn away from other functions that the family can concentrate upon other functions such as the adaptive function. Through the adaptive function, families are able to concentrate on fitting in society: families can better raise their children to function fully in society.

Families are "interested in developing the kind of atmosphere or setting in a home which enables all the people in that home, old and young, to grow into mature and healthy persons – physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, spiritually" (Halliday & Paolucci, 1962). Families are thus expected to provide their children with a sense of individualization, intimacy, resilience, and stability (Barnhill, 1979). It is with these abilities that a child will grow to be a self-sufficient adult.

The family systems theory purports that a family consists of more than its individual parts; this is a holistic viewpoint (Lietz, 2006). There are four subsystems in the family system: spousal, parental, parent-child, and sibling (Lietz, 2006). It is through the interactions of these roles that a family becomes more than individuals living with each other. These individuals become a mother, father, and child, all working towards common goals, such as raising the child to become a self-sufficient adult.

Goals of the Family System

The family is ingrained with the goals of providing their children with safety, well-being, and permanency. LeVine (1988) further develops these three goals and claims they form a hierarchical sequence. "Parents might reasonably want to be assured of infant survival before attending seriously to the child's capacities for socioeconomic participation, and they might well give priority to the child's future economic security over the development of culturally defined virtues" (LeVine, 1988 as cited in Small & Eastman, 1991). It is this hierarchy that places safety and well-being before permanency, similar to the DCYF system.

There are five interrelated functions of parenting: providing basic resources, caring for the home, protecting children, guiding and supporting children's physical and psychological development, and advocating with the wider community on the behalf of their children (Alvy, 1989 as cited in Small & Eastman, 1991). Although these parenting functions may differ in execution because families are organized differently, they are still essential to proper parenting.

Providing basic resources, caring for the home, and protecting children are all functions that lead to the safety of the child. Guiding and supporting the children's physical and psychological development as well as advocating on their behalf ensures their well-being. By consistently and constantly providing these five functions, parents are providing permanency. Children can depend on these functions from their parents. It is clear that these combined functions contribute to the proper development of a child.

In the family system, there is only one permanency goal because the family's desire is for the child to remain with the family. Through enacting the functions and

goals of parenting, families are assuming that their child will remain in the family. If parents believed that their child would not remain in the family, they would not feel the social responsibility to act according to these functions and goals. There would be no need for them to prepare the child for adulthood if they had no emotional investment in the future of their child. Because of this, families are structured to provide permanency.

Leaving the Family System

A child who becomes an adult in age will still exist in their role as son or daughter to their parents. Although the son or daughter may be legally regarded as an adult, which is usually at the age of 18, their parents will still provide them with support and encouragement. "The lengthening of the period of adolescence has led to a protracted period of responsibility for parents" (Small & Eastman, 1991). Parental support does not legally, emotionally, or psychologically end on the 18th birthday of their child.

This is evidenced in a variety of ways. Often, parents will continue their financial support of the child. For example, parents will allow their child to continue living at home after their 18th birthday. Children who attend college often receive assistance from their parents in paying tuition. A parent is also often there to help their son or daughter out of a financial bind such as rent or electrical bill. Financial support does not end at the age of 18.

Parents also continue to emotionally support their child. This support will likely last for the rest of their relationship. A daughter or son can often go to their parents for advice on a big decision such as college acceptance. College students often have regular phone calls with their parents to vent their frustrations. The continuous emotional bond between a father and daughter is evidenced when he walks her down the aisle at her

wedding. Because parents are emotionally invested in their children, it is likely that this

emotional bond will never break.

Reliance of Other Populations on Government Assistance Programs

Former foster youth are not the sole users of government assistance programs.

Other populations of people in need also utilize these programs. There are approximately

9,925 families who receive assistance through the Family Independence Plan (FIP) in

Rhode Island, including 19,300 children and 7,100 adults ("Facts About FIP", 2007).

Although the size of the population of former foster youths is unknown, given the size of

the current foster youth population, it is unlikely that the foster care population accounts

for all of the support and services provided to families receiving FIP.

Medicaid provides health coverage to 183,769 children, disabled and elderly in

Rhode Island ("Medicaid Matters", 2007). In Rhode Island, 137,607 children and

families receive coverage through the state's RIte Care program ("Medicaid Matters",

2007). Once again, the former foster youth population cannot explicate all of these

families utilizing the RIte Care program. Additionally, 46,162 elderly and disabled

receive Medicaid assistance ("Medicaid Matters", 2007). While current and former

foster youths receive assistance from Medicaid, they do not account for the assistance

provided to the elderly population.

The homeless population also accounts for some assistance that former foster

youths also receive. The average wait for Section 8 vouchers is almost five years and

enrollments have been closed in most communities ("Facts on Homelessness", 2006).

Sixty percent of Rhode Island households cannot afford to by the median priced single

family home in any Rhode Island community. Former foster youths do not make up 60%

of the Rhode Island households, therefore there must be others who have not been in the foster care system utilizing government funded housing assistance.

Aging Out at Eighteen

There are programs in Rhode Island which work to prepare foster youth for adulthood. Some of these programs are the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and the John H. Chafee Life Skills Center for Adolescents. The Life Skills Program is a sixteen week course that teaches various topics important to becoming self-sufficient and living independently ("RICORP", 2007). Some of these topics include obtaining affordable housing, preparing nutritious meals, obtaining employment, interpersonal skills, and money management. A Life Skills graduate said, "I think [Life Skills] was a very good and positive thing. It taught me a lot about when I go on my own and how to shop for things I need" ("Life Skills Program", 2007).

After the completion of the Life Skills Program, each youth receives a certificate, a stipend for $200, a care package, and participates in a graduation ceremony. The first graduating Life Skills class graduated on March 6, 2002 ("RICORP", 2007). The Life Skills Program also provide a permanent connection for their graduates. Life Skills hosts graduate gatherings which allow for the youth to return and strengthen those connections they made in the program. Not only is this program able to prepare foster youths to be self-sufficient, but it also provides them with a support system which they may otherwise lack. Due to its popularity and success, the Life Skills Program was able to secure a 3 year grant from the United Way of South Eastern New England which will eliminate the waiting list to get into the program by 2008 by allowing for additional youths to receive training.

Current State of the Budget in Rhode Island

Rhode Island is currently in a budget deficit; the General Assembly enacted a $6,977 million budget in the 2008 fiscal year ("FY 2008 Budget Wrap-Up", 2007). Lawmakers in Rhode Island faced a deficit of $242.9 million at the beginning of 2007 which increased the difficulty in producing a balanced budget ("FY 2008 Budget Wrap-Up", 2007). Governor Carcieri proposed cuts to services provided to youths ages 18-21 in the care of DCYF, among other cuts to social services, in order to decrease this deficit.

This cut to foster youths ages 18-21 was passed by the General Assembly, thus creating a savings of $24.3 million in the budget ("FY 2008 Budget Wrap-Up", 2007). Instead of completely cutting this population off, the Assembly required that DCYF maintain services to 800 youths in this population on a voluntary basis. They provided the Department with $10.5 million to continue assistance to this population ("FY 2008 Budget Wrap-Up", 2007).

These budget cuts to foster youths ages 18-21 were not the only cuts to social services. The Child Care Assistance Program which provides subsidized child care to poor working parents was cut by $19.8 million ("FY 2008 Budget Wrap-Up", 2007). The Medicaid Program was cut by $750,000 through increasing co-pays ("FY 2008 Budget Wrap-Up", 2007). Because of the budget deficit, many government assistance programs lost portions of their funding. The foster care population was not singled out in these budget cuts. Unfortunately, they were viewed as necessary in an attempt to balance the budget.

Hypothesis

Youth in the foster care system and family system may appear to be different at face value due to the factors that lead them into each system. However, both of these systems share the same goal of assisting their youths to develop into self-sufficient adults. This development doesn't appear to magically occur at a pre-determined age, such as 18 or 21, but instead is encouraged through focusing on the safety, well-being, and permanency of the child through their development. Without permanency, youths from either system are more likely to rely on government assistance programs. In providing a youth with permanency, both systems are able to successfully produce fully self-sufficient adults.

Currently in Rhode Island, there is a need to continue to provide permanency to those youths who have been forced to "age out", unprepared, at the age of 18 due to the budget cuts in 2007. Because it has been shown that continuing permanency will lend itself to more self-sufficient adults, it would seem necessary to provide some sense of permanency to these youths who have been pushed out of foster care. In November 2007, the Young Adults Establishing Self-Sufficiency (YESS) Program was developed in Rhode Island to provide such assistance. Due to its voluntary enrollment, it is necessary that foster youths who are about to age out know about and understand the YESS Program in order to use it to its fullest potential. What do the older foster youths know about the YESS Program and how helpful do they perceive it to be? The more they know about the YESS Program, the more likely they are to make the most of its aid.

Methodology

Design

The Young Adults Establishing Self-Sufficiency (YESS) Program is designed to help former foster youths between the ages of 18 and 21 transition smoothly into adulthood by providing them with financial assistance in their housing and utilities. In order to participate in the program, the young adults must have a full time job, be attending school full time, or split between the two. They are set up in apartments across the state and a plan is developed to determine how much the young adult will financially contribute to the rent and utilities. Each month, the plan is incrementally adjusted so that the YESS Program contributes less to the rent and the young adult contributes more. Over time, the young adult is able to pay the full bill for their rent and utilities, thus establishing self-sufficiency.

Because this is an exploratory study to determine what older foster youths know about the YESS Program, research was conducted through group interviews. This allowed the researcher to explore certain thoughts or topics as they arose in conversation so as to more fully understand what older foster youth understand the YESS Program to entail.

Sample

The sample population was a convenience sample of 11 foster youth who were enrolled in the Life Skills Program. The youth were pre-selected by being enrolled in the Life Skills Program which only works with older youth in foster care. The sample consisted of three males and eight females. There were three 16 year olds, six 17 year olds, one 19 year old, and one 20 year old. Their length of involvement with DCYF

ranged from 7 months to 17 years, with a mean of 5 years and 7 months and a median of

5 years. Seven lived in group homes, three lived in an independent living program (ILP),

and one lived in a foster home.

Data Gathering

   Data was collected through group interviews with the youth in the Life Skills

Program. In the group interviews, older foster youth were asked about their current

knowledge concerning the YESS Program, including how many of them knew about the

YESS Program, how to enroll in the YESS Program, what services are offered in the

YESS Program, and how they believe the YESS Program will be able to assist them

individually. In addition to questions concerning the YESS Program, the youth were

asked what other services they believe would be helpful in their transition out of care if

they do not feel that the YESS Program can fully assist them.

Data Analysis

   From the youth interviews, the researcher looked at what was known about the

YESS Program and who was providing the knowledge. In looking at the YESS Program

discussions, similar themes were identified in how much foster youth knew about the

YESS Program. The other services discussed were simply noted for further exploration

in future studies.

   From the interviews, seven of the older foster youth said they had heard of the

YESS Program. Three of them had already applied and one of them was currently

enrolled in the YESS Program, counting as involvement with the program. Those who

were involved with YESS knew of the full time vocational and/or educational

requirements. Among those involved, there was also an understanding that the YESS

Program provides young adults with financial assistance in paying for rent and utilities. However, only one youth verbalized an understanding of the gradual process in which the young adult is expected to contribute more to their expenses. Of those who were not currently involved in the YESS Program, only three voiced opinions or ideas throughout the rest of the interviews.

When asked about the positive and negative aspects of YESS, those who were involved with the program spoke up. Initially, one youth seemed to view YESS in a negative manner. When the researcher introduced the topic she would be speaking on, this youth had an outburst against the YESS Program. However, when prompted to explain why she felt so strongly against it, the youth could not pinpoint any exact negative aspects. Throughout the conversation, she seemed to say only positive things about the program. Other youths thought that it was positive to receive "free money" and assistance in finding housing. However, a few spoke out on disliking the educational and vocational requirement. Ultimately, most of the youth who spoke about their knowledge of the program had positive things to say. One youth who had applied said, "You should use it if you can. It seems to be good for a lot of people." Two youth who were not currently involved in the program said they think they would use it when they turn eighteen.

When asked about other programs or forms of assistance that could be offered, the youth did not seem to be able to think of things immediately. After some prompts from the researcher, they came up with the following items: buying a car, getting furniture, purchasing car or medical insurance, help in finding a job, help in applying to college, and "more free money."

Findings

The researcher found that those who were involved with the YESS Program knew the basics about the program. However, of those who were not involved with the YESS Program, only three expressed a minimal knowledge and opinion about the program. It is this finding that leads the researcher to believe that there must be some correlation between an understanding of the YESS Program and involvement in YESS. However, it is unclear whether this relationship is a causal relationship or necessary. By knowing more about the YESS Program, older foster youths may be more inclined to seek their services while those who do not know about it would not seek their services. However, those involved with the YESS Program should know what it entails due to their involvement.

Because the sample is a convenience sample, many interviews need to be conducted in order to show replication of results. It is possible that by being enrolled in the Life Skills Program, the foster youth interviewed have more awareness than other foster youth of the services provided to them due to what is learned through Life Skills and a prior investment of the youth in their future.

Conclusion

Because of the Rhode Island budget cuts in 2007, foster youth in Rhode Island are now forced to age out of the system at the age of 18 years old, rather than 21. The YESS Program was established to provide services to this population of foster youths no longer in DCYF care in order to help them to establish self-sufficiency. However, because the YESS Program is voluntary, it is important that foster youths know about the YESS Program in order to access its assistance. This study was designed to examine what older

foster youth know about the YESS Program and how they believe it will be able to help them. The more they know about the YESS Program, the more likely they will be to utilize its assistance.

It seems that those who know about YESS are already enrolled or have taken steps to apply to the YESS Program. This could either be because they knew about the program previous to their application and were interested enough to apply, or they learned about the program after they became involved. This could suggest that knowing about the YESS Program and applying to the YESS Program are related in some way. However, it is not enough evidence to show that one causes the other. Others who did not know about the YESS Program may not have been interested in those services due to a lack of knowledge or lack of pressure to investigate services offered after aging out. Because those who did not know about the YESS Program did not exclude their future application, it does not appear that full knowledge about the YESS Program is a prerequisite to involvement.

It appeared that the youth interviewed were unsure about what other services they would like to have once they aged out. As the researcher was asking what other services would be helpful, it seemed that they needed to be prompted for initial ideas on what services could be helpful. Although they were able to come up with ideas on their own after some prompting, it was unclear to the researcher whether they had thought about what services would be helpful in their transition out of care.

There are multiple implications for social work practice that stem from this research. First and foremost, due to the current situation in Rhode Island in which many older foster youth are unexpectedly aging out of the foster care system, it is important

that social workers that are involved with older foster youth discuss with them their options as they age out. In having this conversation, they will be more aware about what aging out involves and how they can advocate for themselves as they approach it. This includes more discussion of the YESS Program and what it entails, which could be stimulated by YESS information sessions and orientations.

Additionally, more programs need to be established to properly serve this population of young adults. While the YESS Program is able to help those who are able to meet their educational and vocational requirements, many older foster youths are unable to hold down a full time job or attend school. Other pilot programs should be established to help those who cannot participate in the YESS Program.

This also entails implications for social work research. Further research should be done concerning what could best help those who cannot participate in the YESS Program. While this study asked for ideas on what other assistance could be provided to youth aging out of foster care, it did not explore how to develop a program to offer such assistance. Additionally, further study should focus on what other types of assistance could be offered within the YESS Program to encourage self-sufficiency.

Research could also focus on the existing YESS Program. In the near future, some research should be done on how to best advertise for YESS. Because it was clear that many older foster youth had not heard of the YESS Program, some further study could focus on methods to encourage enrollment. A study that should be done in the more distant future would examine the effectiveness of the YESS Program. This could help to inform and expand the practice of the YESS Program.

Finally, this study has many implications for social work policy. The ideal policy change would be to reinstate care and assistance to foster youth between the ages of 18 and 21, thus moving the "aging out" age back up to 21. However, since this is unlikely, there is a need for additional programs to assist this population. While the YESS Program is able to help a high functioning population of former foster youth, there are still many more former foster youth who will languish when they leave care. Without these programs, there is a much greater chance that this population will utilize other government assistance programs later on in life at a greater expense to the state. The YESS Program is a step in the right direction, but social work practice, research, and policy should all be striving towards providing additional assistance to these former foster youths.

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