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Group pushes to secure help for ex-foster youths

American Bar Association says teens aging out of system shouldn't be left to fend for themselves

By Sara Steffens

For Jessalynn Castaneda, like thousands of other California foster youths, turning 18 was no cause for celebration.

In the months leading up to her milestone birthday, she was living in transitional housing in El Cerrito, raising her 2-year-old son, attending school full time and working as many hours as she could at Starbucks.

"The thought of emancipating was so scary, every dime I had went into savings," said Castaneda. "They told me I had to be out on my 18th birthday."

Despite saving \$5,000, she quickly realized she wouldn't be able to afford rent for even a modest apartment, let alone childcare.

Her dilemma is one all too familiar to leaders of the American Bar Association, which has launched a national campaign calling for better services for foster youth entering adulthood.

Each year, more than 20,000 U.S. teenagers turn 18 and leave the foster care system, including 4,000 in California.

"These young people become like instant orphans," said Karen Mathis, president of the American Bar Association and founder of its Commission on Youth at Risk.

"They can't go back home, and they're entering a world as adults without the skills they need to live. ... And the results can be horrendous."

A large study of former foster youths conducted for Casey Family Programs found that more than one

in five experience homelessness, one in three live below the federal poverty level, and one in four suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, a rate almost double that of combat veterans.

Twenty-six states cut off assistance when foster youths turn 18, Mathis said. The others offer varying degrees of help. In California, for example, some foster youths get a judge's order to remain in care past their 18th birthday, usually so they can finish high school; but counties receive no federal reimbursement for this.

Only a few states -- notably Illinois and New York -- allow all youths to voluntarily remain in foster care through age 19, 20 or 21.

At the Bar Association's annual meeting next week in San Francisco, members will vote on a resolution calling for all states to offer foster care services, including housing and education, through age 21.

The resolution also calls for extending the federal McKinney-Vento Act, which provides educational rights to homeless students, to cover foster children.

Mathis hopes attorneys, judges and local bar associations across the nation will not only support the expanded services, but lobby to help make them happen.

Legislation introduced this year by California Sen. Barbara Boxer would extend federal funding to help states offer foster care services through age 21. The bill, S. 1512, is awaiting a hearing in the Senate Committee on Finance.

"It's really a chump change in the federal budget to provide this support," said former state Sen. John Burton, founder of the John Burton Foundations for Homeless Youth, urging bar association members to throw their weight behind the bill. "If the federal government would step up and continue their participation, we could get enough support in this state to do it."

Left to fend for herself, Castaneda initially moved in with her baby's father, a situation she described as "a mess." A few months later, an independent living skills counselor referred her to San Francisco's Larkin Street Youth Services, one of the few places in the Bay Area that provide subsidized housing for former foster youths.

Now 20 years old, Castaneda shares a studio apartment in San Francisco with her son. Enrolled in college, she is earning a straight-A average and hopes to become a social worker to help other teenage moms get on their feet.

"If I wasn't the lucky one that could participate in this program, I would probably be on the streets with my son or in a shelter," Castaneda said. "It's really hard when you don't have the necessary skills to make it."

"To know that you're supported and people care about you, you can move and grow a lot better than doing it alone."

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