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Lost kids: When foster children reach adulthood

Minnesota is trying to improve its performance in settling foster children before they reach adulthood.

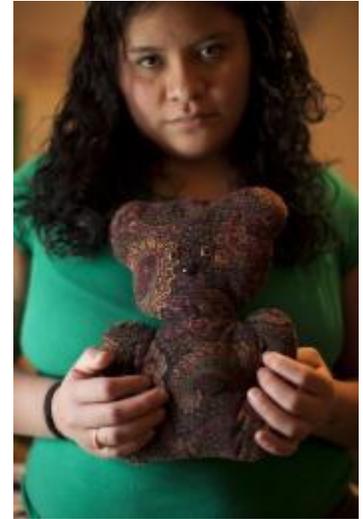
By **JEREMY OLSON**¹ and **JIM SPENCER**², Star Tribune staff writers

Teens stuck in foster care rarely forget the day they become adults.

For Jibe Young, it was the day he turned 18 and his foster parents said he had to move out -- but that his little brother could stay because the state was still paying for him. Destiny Helfrich shoved her foster mother on the day she was told to leave home -- and was arrested and jailed for two nights. Her next stop was a homeless shelter.

"If she's not getting paid, I guess she doesn't love me anymore," said Helfrich, now 20. "That's how I felt."

Every year, 500 to 600 foster children in Minnesota reach adulthood without any parents -- despite the state's efforts to reunite them with their birth families or place them for adoption. Compared to other states, Minnesota has a high rate of children who, like Helfrich and Young, "age out" of the system after three years or more.



Destiny Helfrich

The problem is gaining attention from state and federal authorities, because the consequences are severe. One-third of the youths who age out of foster care are homeless within four years, according to University of Chicago research, and nearly half of the young men spend time in jail.

Now the federal government is challenging Minnesota and other states to improve their performance. Last October it ordered states to start collecting data so it could track how well they help these young people make the transition to adulthood.

"They may have somebody they know -- but not a direct connection and not a tight family network," said Fatima Muhammad, a mentor for former foster youth at the YMCA's 24/Seven program. "They're alone."

Mentoring programs like hers are part of the state's strategy to prepare foster youth for life alone. But state officials believe new federal funding and other measures will allow Minnesota to improve these transitions and cut the number of children who age out in the first place.

"We aren't serving kids very well when they're in care for long periods of time," said Erin Sullivan Sutton, an assistant commissioner at the Department of Human Services.

Drifting

It's a tough group of kids. One in five who aged out in 2008 had mental disorders or disabilities. One in 10 were removed from birth homes because of their own behaviors, addictions or disabilities.

Destiny Helfrich drifted in and out of foster care from infancy to age 7, when her drug-addicted mother's rights were terminated. The lack of attachment led to bitterness, and that led to multiple placements -- 37 by the time she aged out.



Destiny Helfrich arrived at her former foster mother's house

Her partying and skipping school at 14 led the foster parents she trusted most to send her to a corrections facility. Three foster homes later, she returned to those parents as a homeless adult. They took her in without pay on condition she start school and get a job.

In 2007, Minnesota found permanent homes for 15.6 percent of foster children who had been in care for 24 months, according to federal data. The national average: 26.3 percent.

The state has responded by focusing adoption recruitment on extended relatives or foster parents of hard-to-adopt kids.

Officials say the number of kids awaiting adoption has declined as a result. Of 819 children in state guardianship, 342 are in need of adoptive homes.

But barriers remain. Adoptive parents get paid less than foster parents, for one. A trial project in six counties did entice foster parents to adopt by leveling the benefits, but legislation to expand the approach statewide has failed to pass.

Permanency

Adoption isn't a cure-all. Having bounced among foster homes, teens often lash out at their new parents and test their commitment. Shelters often find themselves taking in adopted teens who run away or are thrown out.

Adoption is nonetheless a preferred goal for Minnesota; its federal child-welfare funding is tied partly to the speed of its adoptions and its minimal use of long-term foster care.

"Adoptive parents can kick a kid out -- but they're still the parents," said Michelle Chalmers, an adoption specialist for Ampersand Families. "Foster parents can kick a kid out and they're done."

Children in foster care sense that fragility and often seek out the birth parents who mistreated them. Jibe Young used to sneak out of his foster home with his brother and bike several miles to visit their birth mother.

He didn't seek her out, though, when he turned 18 and was on his own. Young had been captain for his

high school football team; he found tackling therapeutic and hoped for a college scholarship until poor grades cost him his chance. Instead, he got an assembly line job at Boston Scientific.

Despite what he was told, Young didn't have to leave his foster home because he turned 18. Minnesota allows foster children to remain in state-funded care until 21 and grants them tuition waivers to state colleges if they have jobs. The state also allows foster children who age out to re-enter care within six months.

Trouble is, some county agencies either don't understand these options or don't use them enough, Erin Sullivan Sutton said. The state has sent reminders to them, she added.

New federal initiatives are also in the works. As of Oct. 1, the federal government started sharing in the cost of extending foster care to age 21. The new National Youth in Transition database will monitor services provided to foster youth who are aging out and track their academic, financial and social well-being from age 17 to 21.

'I Hate You Lane'

Willie Gates feared the day might come when his foster parents would turn him out. So he worked jobs at McDonald's and Target and saved enough to rent his own place at age 17.

"I just didn't want that moment to come," he said.

Gates, now 20, got a job as a medication aide for nursing homes. Even then, he still harbored anger over his mother's neglect and his jailed father's absence. He worried about his sister, still in foster care.

Gates started writing letters to people who hurt him. A few were mailed. Some went to addresses like "123 I Hate You Lane." Others he crumpled and burned. "I got a lot of stuff off my chest," he said.

It's critical for youth to find that outlet and move beyond "the old feelings of hurt and anger," said Muhammad, who oversees a support group including Gates, Young and Helfrich.

Without football, Young turned to poetry as a means of venting. He also mended relationships with his birth mother and foster parents.

Helfrich said her mother reached out via Facebook, but she isn't interested in a relationship. Driving her is the realization that she was following her mother's destructive path.

Helfrich earned a degree in cooking and works at a Pei Wei restaurant. She leans on the support group and takes satisfaction in their presentations to child welfare leaders about teens stuck in the system. Maybe, she thinks, her story can help.



A support group

"A lot of us are angry, crazy, acting out," she said. "Who knows how to deal with a crazy teenager like that? We know." "A lot of us are angry, crazy, acting out," she said. "Who knows how to deal with a crazy teenager like that? We know."

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