

Permanency Planning Today

The Quarterly Newsletter of the National Resource Center for Permanency Planning
 Hunter College School of Social Work, 129 East 79th Street, NY, NY 10021

Phone: 212-452-7053; Fax: 212-452-7051; E-mail: nrcpp@shiva.hunter.cuny.edu

NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR....

FULFILLING THE PROMISE OF PERMANENCY FOR YOUTH

Sarah B. Greenblatt

In this issue of Permanency Planning Today we continue our exploration of the opportunities and challenges that flow from the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. States have been quickly passing compliance legislation over the past year, with the recognition that they will need to clarify provisions and document gaps in resource availability overtime. Such 'tweaking' will be necessary throughout the process of implementation in order to best meet ASFA's safety, permanency and timely decision-making intent.

ASFA was passed in response to deep concern about the increasing numbers of children entering and remaining in out-of-home care - some who have literally grown up in the foster care system! It is these children who pose the greatest challenges to meeting ASFA's expectations for timely decision-making - children for whom we have not kept the promise of permanency. The articles in this issue of Permanency Today address the experiences of these children - the power that 'family' holds for them, efforts to hear their stories and share information with them, strategies to help them address their feelings of loss and unresolved grief, and the benefits of including the voices of children, youth and families in our planning and work.

ASFA's requirements to review the situations of all children in care 15 of the most recent 22 months, on an annual basis, provides a window of opportunity for us to regularly reconsider the range of permanency options that may be possible for each child - current caretakers, their birth parents or other family members, past caretakers, or specially recruited families - all who may be potential permanency resources now! We must take the risk to fight the myths that adolescents are 'too old' for a family, or don't 'deserve' a family, or aren't 'ready' for a family. Every child deserves

and needs a family. Without the social and emotional security found in being connected to a family, the process of healthy identity formation becomes even more difficult than it already is!

Sharon Karow, our Information Specialist, has coordinated this issue of Permanency Today in collaboration with colleagues from around the country - people who work with youth in care, and several young people themselves. Robin Nixon's article describes the Child Welfare League of America's new grant initiative - Positive Youth Development and Independent Living: Building Staff Competency and System Capacity. Bob Lewis advocates for adoption as a permanency plan for adolescent youth who are unable to return to their birth families. Carol Schmidt's article addresses strategies to help legally free youth find a sense of connectedness and support in preparing for 'independent living' when the system could not find them a family.

Jennifer Nelson, NRCPP's Assistant Director, writes about the Center's Listening to Youth Project which she has so patiently supervised over the past year and a half. Listening to Youth has been our beginning effort to involve

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young people once in foster care in improving the quality of services provided by the child welfare system in New York City. It has been a moving - and at times, disturbing - project. It has highlighted the uneven capacity of today's child welfare system to meet children's urgent developmental needs. However, this project has reminded us, as well, of the strengths and the resiliency of the many young people who have grown up with the trauma of multiple, often unexplained, moves and relationship disruptions.

Finally, two young people who have grown up in New York City's child welfare system reflect on their experiences. Their stories, originally published in *Foster Care Youth United* - a newsletter written by and for youth in foster care - demonstrate the often "too little, too late" reality of independent living training. It is interesting that both young people sought refuge with their birth mothers when exiting the system - a strong statement about the power of "family" despite extensive separations.

How We Can Help:

NRCPP has a particular interest in assisting group and residential care programs, as well as foster family agencies, to improve their capacity to find permanence for youth in care - permanence as defined legally and psychologically. We can provide training and technical assistance on the elements of family-centered practice with youth in care, and encourage agencies to contact us or their federal Regional Offices to determine if you are eligible for free training or technical assistance.

We also encourage states to more fully recognize the value of including the voices of children, youth and families in efforts to meet ASFA's complex mandates. We need to listen to their stories and respect their unique perspectives! For only then will we have

the potential of developing the kind of family-centered and non-adversarial services that we would want for our own families!

Sarah B. Greenblatt

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND INDEPENDENT LIVING: BUILDING STAFF COMPETENCY AND SYSTEM CAPACITY

By Robin Nixon, B.S., Director, Youth Services, Child Welfare League of America

Washington, DC -- Across the country, nearly 500,000 children are in some form of out-of-home care, often referred to as foster care. Many will remain with foster families for varying periods of time, and most will eventually be reunited with their birth families. About 100,000 will be adopted. But there is another possibility for young people in foster care. Each year about 25,000 teenagers will "age out" of the nation's foster care system and move from group homes and other supervised living arrangements to begin life on their own.

In 1993, the Child Welfare League of America initiated the Positive Youth Development: Preparing Youths in Out-of-Home Care for Adulthood project. From 1994 to 1996, CWLA provided support, training, and technical assistance to assist its member agen-

cies to develop and enhance independent living programs by integrating a positive youth development philosophy. CWLA staff, in partnership with staff from the National Network for Youth, conducted formal training in positive youth development at five sites over the two years. During 1997, the final year of the project, information and resources were disseminated to CWLA's members as well as to the general field of youth services.

In partnership with CWLA and the young people served by their programs, these agencies have taken tremendous strides forward in the practice of positive youth development. Staff and young people from the project sites, as well as members of CWLA's National Advisory Committees on Independent Living and Youth Services, have actively participated in the League's conferences and other training events. Their enthusiasm for "spreading the word" about positive youth development has helped other agencies realize the potential of this approach for strengthening programs for young people.

Building on the accomplishments of the previous project, CWLA began a new project in 1998 that is designed to strengthen the way the nation's child welfare system helps teenagers make the crucial transition from foster care to adulthood. CWLA has received a four-year, \$1,242,631, grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund for a special initiative called Positive Youth Development and Independent Living: Building Staff Competency and System Capacity.

Over four years, CWLA, in collaboration with the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the National Independent Living Association, the National Resource Center for Youth

Development, and its own member agencies, will:

- support intensive training in all 50 states and the District of Columbia of child welfare staff who are responsible for providing independent living services to young people in foster care;
- provide specific training and follow-up support to the staffs of 100 community-based agencies that serve youth;
- work for changes in federal policy and programs that help youth in foster care, and
- educate public and private sector leaders in the child welfare field about positive youth development.

For more information on the project, contact Robin Nixon or Maria Garin at CWLA, (202) 638-2952 or email: rnixon@cwla.org, mgarin@cwla.org.

THERE IS A PATH TO FAMILY PERMANENCE FOR ADOLESCENTS

By Robert Lewis, M.Ed., M.S.W.,
L.I.C.S.W., Gloucester, MA

To every child removed from his/her family of origin, we make a promise. We promise to provide a better family (their own or another) than the one from whom we have separated them. For children who have spent years in the system, that promise is either forgotten or thought to be "unkeepable." But many youth carry the hope, despite the overwhelming number of reasons not to.

The children themselves haven't given up on the promise's fulfillment.

In a recent study of 17 and 18-year-old foster children in Wisconsin, a significant number were brave enough to talk about their dreams.

Approximately, 41% of all respondents indicated that they wanted to be adopted. Seemingly, their relationships to their parents or the circumstances of their parents' lives have remained sufficiently problematic that they have little desire to return to their families of origin. (Wisconsin, 1998)

Yet, to most hard pressed social workers, the older the child, the less suitable he or she becomes for family life. Thus, the responsibility for not keeping society's promise gets shifted from the adults to the children. Among the reasons for this shift are mistaken notions about: 1) adolescent developmental tasks, 2) the challenges inherent in parenting adolescents, and 3) the perceived "impossibility" of preparing adolescents for family life and 4) the daunting task of finding permanent families for them.

Developmentally, teenagers in care do bring serious challenges to identity formation. They must deal with the ramifications of past trauma, the emotionally limiting aftermath of neglect and the debilitating mistrust of family connections spawned by multiple moves within the system. Yet it is clear that all children fare better with the support of caring, involved adults, at every developmental stage and in every challenge - even teenage children.

Given the continued importance of present and future family connections in the lives of adolescents, especially adolescents considered to be "at-risk," we must deepen our understanding of the levels of "resistance" to or under-valuation of adoption options, and the need for permanent family connections for this population. For example:

- Some child caring professionals, especially in residential services, see family connections as impossible or unnecessary in light of the adolescent's primary goal of individuation;
- Many adolescents themselves verbally fear, and thus reject the prospect of family life and often are taken at their word;
- Some families are afraid or unwilling to attempt parenting an adolescent;
- Many workers want to protect individual adolescents from the risk of not finding a permanent family, and

Facts About Foster Care Youth

1. Approximately one-quarter of the children in care have no plans for being either reunited with their birth families or adopted.

2. Each year, an estimated 25,000 adolescents "age out" of the foster care system (generally at age 18) when the state no longer will pay foster parents for expenses.

3. Adolescents' transition to independent living is particularly difficult because foster care systems lack the resources needed to prepare teens adequately for independent living. As of 1997, fewer than 25% of foster care agencies provided employment-related services for youths in care; only 17% provided employment and career-training assessments; 16% provided job training and 24% provided vocational training.

*Child Welfare League of America,
The Foster Care Project.*

the additional trauma of further rejection and loss.

Professionals often overlook the sources of their own "resistance" and personal value-driven concerns. Professionals in group homes and treatment centers often struggle with two inherent biases: their own devel-

opmental processes and their limited understanding of the source of the adolescents' emotional challenges. Staff are largely young adults who are themselves establishing their own "independence" from parents and parenting figures. Their conscious or unconscious feelings about their own growth processes often effect their responses and reactions to the adolescents in their charge. Systemically, with the "least restrictive environment" philosophy virtually universal, residential treatment and group care living arrangements are seen as a "failure" of a parent/family setting to meet an adolescent's needs. That "failure" is often reflected in negative attitudes of staff toward families as viable resources for their clients.

Most often cited are the negative reactions of the adolescents themselves. However, it is easy to imagine what a rejection of "adoption" might mean coming from a teenager. They know very little beyond the popular image of baby adoptions. Young adolescents are especially likely to consider themselves ready for complete independence. Their images of family life are limited, often based on very dysfunctional experiences with family life. They don't want to be hurt again, don't want to risk another rejection and they're not prepared to cut themselves off from the past: all misconceptions. Furthermore, adolescents in care have good reasons to fear changes.

As for the families, many come to the child welfare system as hopeful adopters. They believe in their own ability to make a difference in a child's life and they want every assistance to make it work. As the system has advanced appropriately into "full disclosure," adolescents have accumulated a list of labels and descriptions that would turn the most "normal" of teens into "dragons." The very stereotype of

a teenager is one of opposition and irrational challenges to authority. They are often thought to be unreachable and unteachable. Even optimistic adults want children with "just one fewer strike" against them when they choose a child to parent. And yet there are people who love working with and parenting adolescents. (Hopefully, our group homes, community centers, junior and senior high schools are full of them.)

Perhaps the most often heard professional concern is fear of "another rejection." For many teens who have had multiple disappointments, losses and feelings of failure with families, instilling the hope of permanent family ties without delivering a family could be profoundly devastating. However, this view of the risks misses the point on several fronts. First the youths are living the reality of rejection and coming to terms with those rejections almost daily. Most often it is the workers who must now face the child's rejections in the process of developing a new family resource. Successful teenage adoptions are always a team effort. Adolescents need the guidance of staff and former caretakers to make good decisions, but they must also make the decisions for themselves. Professionals need to recognize that teens can be truly self-determining in this process.

Finally, underneath the fear of risk to the adolescent is the worker's own fear of not being able to deliver. The time available to workers is limited, and adolescent permanence takes more time. Due to limited perceptions about permanence and adolescence, there are very few tools available to workers to help them prepare teens for families. Workers experience a real dissonance in not wanting to blame the system of which they are a part. They find it hard to acknowledge their own limita-

tions, and so by default, they too often find it easier to avoid fulfilling the promise made to children at the time protective services removed them from their birth families.

So we can see that the risks are real. What's needed is a process of reaching out aggressively to realistically recruit potential family resources, specifically for these teens - finding resources from their own past (or "missed opportunities") (Davis, 1996) and from the community. The process requires authenticity, clarity and directness between staff and teens. It also requires acknowledgement among professionals that this is no less a commitment than keeping the original promise. Once we believe it, we can keep the promise. We just have to work on the know-how and how-to.

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Bob is a new consultant with NRCPP, and a veteran expert in meeting the

Editor's Note...

On January 29, 1999 our own Sarah Greenblatt, Director of NRCPP was a special guest at the White House. Because of her commitment to increasing the capacity of child welfare agencies to provide children with safe, permanent families in supportive communities, she was invited to hear Hillary Rodham Clinton, Tipper Gore, and Donna Shalala announce President Clinton's new efforts to support transitioning youth.

The president's FY2000 budget will include \$280 million, over five years, in support for young people who "age out" of our nation's foster care system without having had the benefit of permanence. The president's budget will increase the Independent Living Program, offer time-limited financial support, provide health insurance to age 21, and increase the transitional living program.

challenges of placing special needs children and youth with adoptive families.

LIFE AFTER FOSTER CARE: WHAT CAN LEGALLY FREE ADOLESCENTS WALK AWAY WITH?

By Carol Schmidt, M.S.W., Mercer Island, WA

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is difficult for adolescents. Adolescents who have "aged out" of foster care, however, encounter more obstacles and are often less prepared to meet financial, health, social, and educational challenges than adolescents who have not experienced foster care.

Adolescents who remain in foster care to age eighteen often do so because they have been seriously abused or neglected, or because of their troublesome behavior. In these cases, foster care is not short-term. It is "foster care with tenure" (Goldstein, 1975). Some legally free adolescents will never be adopted. Emotionally and physically abandoned by their birth parents, moved among several foster homes, the odds of a good transition to independent living are thus stacked against them.

There is growing literature on homeless late adolescents which suggests consistent themes and indicators of difficulties for those who "age out" of our foster care systems. For example, former foster kids sometimes have great difficulty obtaining and keeping housing. The National Alliance To End Homelessness examined studies and reports chronicling the relationship between homelessness and foster care. All sources of data consulted support the primary finding that people with a foster care history are over-represented in the homeless population (Roman and Wolfe, 1997). Many of these youth lack what has been called "Social Capital," broadly defined as the benefits from being socially connected in communities and families.

Of all of the differences and the system failures which affect these legally free adolescents who are not adopted, one of the most difficult to quantify is that of the loss of identity and history. We do not usually create the treasured "Lifebook" for them. They often do not know their birth parents' extended family members, the birth parents' family history and stories, birth parents' strengths, their own personal health histories, nor do they have their school records and important "passport" documents in order to transition from foster care to adult life. Of particular emotional consequence is the absence and loss of the stories of the family culture. "To hear a story told and retold in one's childhood, and to recount that tale in turn when one has earned the right to do so, is to actively preserve one's culture (Abrams, 1997)."

Adolescents in foster care frequently walk away with disturbing family histories often distorted by painful experiences, inaccurate information, and huge blank spaces. One of the events most vulnerable to distortion is

the child's first, or early removal from the home. Equally emotionally problematic and vague is the reason for termination of parental rights. For many legally free adolescents these events are nested in painful memories. Common to many is a deep cynicism about the "system" which was the "parent" for the years in foster care. For many, the reunification fantasy runs very deep: "I can go back to my mom and dad".

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The following recommendations can assist in planning with young people for the transition from long term foster care to adulthood:

1. Although, providing legally-free adolescents with their case file and "passport" documents is not a remedy for their lack of 'social capital' and will not help them prosper in unfavorable, (i.e. homeless) environments, child wel-

Facts About Foster Care Youth

For reasons still poorly understood, a disproportionate number of adult homeless persons-ranging from 9 to 39 percent, depending upon the study-spent some time in foster care as children.

Taken from the "Priority Home!: The Federal Plan to Break the Cycle of Homelessness," issued in March 1994.

fare social workers should use these strategies to contribute to adolescents' understanding of their history and help them collect the things that the adolescent feels are valuable.

2. Funding to support the additional time and work required may be available from grants and from special state resources. Interns and work study students can contribute enthusiasm and labor. Using medical coupons and mental health tier benefits, adolescents can meet with a counselor or mentor to talk over the reunification fantasy, to explore their experiences in the foster care system, express what they would like to say to family members, and seek closure to the experiences of foster care.

The following documents and history may be critical to the adolescent's understanding of the agency's history of their life:

- *Summary of the basis for Child Protective Services placement and Termination of Parental Rights*
- *Summary of the reasons that no adoption occurred*
- *Names of all known family members and their last known addresses*
- *Placement history using standard confidentiality protections*
- *Photographs*
- *Legal documents and Birth Certificate*
- *Public Health Nursing Medical Passport*
- *School records*
- *Letters and any positive statements about the child/adolescent*

3. Beyond the agency's case file, we can consider providing more for the emancipating legally free adolescent through:

- *Help in identifying a connection to someone who cares about them who would remember them for birthdays and invite them for holidays in the future.*
- *Cash assistance for six months of housing.*

- *A safety deposit box or agency on-site storage area.*
- *A videotape of the last (or most meaningful) foster family, or photos of past family connections.*
- *A library card.*
- *A blank book for a journal.*

When the agency terminates parental rights and adolescents age out of foster care without the care and benefits of an adoptive family, we have a fundamental responsibility to assist them in understanding the history which we have collected in case files. In doing so we do not guarantee that they prosper, or that we strengthen the ways in which they carry out the daily activities of their lives. However, we can contribute to their sense of self and their identity by providing some of the important elements of a passport to adulthood.

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their on-the-ground observations to inform child welfare policies and service design. Too often social service agencies and institutions do not consider the inclusion of youth - and their parents, foster parents and other caregivers - in program development activities for effective service design and delivery.

Based on this philosophy, the NRCPP developed the Listening to Youth Project. With funding from the Child Welfare Fund, a New York City based foundation, 18 youth formerly in the in New York City foster care system were interviewed and their experiences captured in the newly available Listening to Youth Project Report. The findings are rich in ideas, reflections, and recommendations for child welfare administrators and workers about how to strengthen services. Though based in New York City, many of the powerful quotes in the report and the policy recommendations can be directly used to strengthen the quality of child welfare service design and worker training and service design around the country.

To celebrate the completion of the Project, a group of child welfare professionals, Project participants and Project staff were brought together as part of the NRCPP Roundtable Discussion Series. Leora Cohen, Project Coordinator, Harriet Putterman, Supervisor, and Sarah Greenblatt introduced the Project, discussed the methodology of the study and presented the recommendations for change within the system. However, the power of the gathering came from the discussion among professionals and those who have experienced the child welfare system in a very personal way. There was no mistaking the failures of the child welfare system to provide youth with the security, stability, connectedness, a sense of belonging, quali-

LISTENING TO YOUTH - NRCPP REPORT RELEASED

By Jennifer Nelson, M.S.W., Assistant Director, NRCPP

Our child welfare system is designed to ensure the safety, permanency and well being of children. Yet these very children - the direct consumers of the system - are rarely consulted about their experiences and ideas. A vehicle does not currently exist in most child welfare systems for

ty education and protection all young people need. And there was real acknowledgement of the success many youth have experienced, despite troubled early life experiences.

For the NRCPP, the Listening to Youth Project has been our beginning effort to involve young people once in foster care in improving the quality of services provided by the child welfare system. We are committed to continuing to raise awareness within the system of the importance of the perspectives of youth to advocate for change within the child welfare system. We will continue to provide updates on our activities in future issues of Permanency Planning Today and

What the System should do. Five things I would like the system to do differently are:

1. Workers should take us on apartment interviews every three to six months. They should start doing this when we're 15 so we learn early on how to look for an apartment. (My independent living workshops weren't followed up with hands-on experiences.)
2. We should be given plenty of written information on different housing options.
3. Every two to four months, we should meet our social worker and agency director to make plans for moving out.
4. Stipends and allowances should be withheld and put into a savings account until we are discharged. That way we'd have some money to get started when we leave the system.
5. Youths should be admitted into adult apartments without having to receive SSI or public assistance.

--Tieysha McVay

The following 2 articles were reprinted with permission from Foster Care Youth United, a newsletter written by and for youth in foster care, and published by Youth Communication/New York Center, Inc. For more information, contact Youth Communication, 224 W. 29th Street, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10001.

encourage others to share their experiences with us.

If you are interested in receiving a copy of the Listening to Youth Project Report, please contact Sharon Karow, Information Specialist at 212-452-7432. For more information about the Listening to Youth Project and follow up efforts, contact Jennifer Nelson, Assistant Director at 212-452-7431.

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE: WE NEED HELP BEFORE WE AGE OUT!

By Tieysha McVay

I was in the system for eight years, but the time for me to age out came much sooner than I expected. I was worried that I would end up homeless because I didn't have a clue about where I was going to live.

A few months before I left my group home, I applied for a program called SPAN, an apartment program for young adults aging out of foster care.

I decided to return home to live with my mother temporarily while I continued planning to move into the adult apartments. Although I really didn't

feel secure about living with my mother, I chose to go because it was the best option for me until I got into the apartment.

My social worker transferred my case to an after-care worker. (After-care is a program to help youngsters adapt to society before they age out.) I figured connecting with my after-care worker would be easy but it wasn't!

Hard to Connect:

In the first couple of weeks I didn't know who she was. She wrote me a letter because she was unable to reach me, then we had a brief phone conversation.

At our first face-to-face meeting I told her what she could do to help me. The conference we had made me feel a bit uncomfortable. Negative vibes came flashing in my mind. I felt as though my after-care worker wasn't really listening to me and she didn't seem to have any answers about apartment programs or other places I could live.

My past relationships with social workers left me with a pessimistic view of them. I felt they withheld information that I could greatly benefit from. A previous social worker hadn't told me about a vocational training school that I qualified for, and when I asked her why, she said she didn't think it was for me.

Time Runs Out:

Being in the after-care program was not different. Any information I wanted I received late or not at all. My after-care worker and I didn't have conferences on a regular basis. She always had a reason to put off my transition planning - a sick day, a vacation, a meeting. My paperwork for the SPAN program was delayed. Time was running out and I became worried that I wouldn't get into an apartment.

My winter recess from college had arrived. I was going to use that time to move out of my mother's house and into one of the SPAN apartments. But my paperwork had not been processed correctly and I still had to live at home.

To get into the apartment program, I needed a complete medical examination and a psychiatric evaluation. I took matters into my own hands and got my medical exam done. I tried to make an appointment for the psychiatric report, but was told that the recommendation should come from my after-care worker.

In other words, I was being told that "isn't my job," and the delays would last longer.

School or an Apartment?:

I still wasn't sure if living in a SPAN apartment would be right for me...I had mixed feelings and a lot of questions. So I wrote down my questions, visited with a SPAN worker, and didn't get the answers I wanted to hear.

In the first place, in order to be accepted into the adult apartments, I had to be receiving SSI income or public assistance. I didn't want either. I am not disabled or lazy.

The other choice I had was to pay for the apartment on my own, but their strict policies would still apply. For example, I would have at least two roommates. There was a level system and no visitors were allowed to spend the night. And I would have to pay not only for the apartment but for my college education as well.

College had become my main priority over the last two years. After all, I want to become a psychiatrist someday. No more playing around with life. This meant I had to plan my goals around college, until I completed my degrees.

Still at Home:

I finally made a decision not to go into the SPAN apartments. I wouldn't accept SSI or public assistance. I couldn't pay for the apartment and at the same time finance my college expenses. It had to be one or the other, and I chose to pay for school. There was not enough time to process paperwork to go on interviews. SPAN was a last resort, leading to a rushed decision.

Seven months after aging out I'm still living with my mother. I'm not happy living at home, but it's the only option I'm willing to live with right now.

I am indeed ready for independent living. I just chose a different option. I didn't have many choices. The very few choices I had weren't told to me early enough so I could explore other options. I don't feel that social workers and administrators can better prepare residents for alternative living arrangements when they age out.

By this I mean not everyone wants to get their own apartment when they age out of foster care. Some people want to live on a college campus and attend school, some want to get roommates to share the cost of living, some return to live with relatives.

Even young adults who weren't in care receive some financial support or continue to live with their parents until they're in the mid or late 20's, because surviving in this world financially is really hard.

The pressure and focus should not be geared toward one solution - that is, getting an apartment the moment you hit 21.

As for my future, I will continue to go to school, work, and save my money. I hope to move out of my mother's house by the end of this year. But I will not rush my decision to leave home unless problems get to

the point where I am unable to handle them.

Take it from someone who has been through the foster care system. You are not alone - reach out and grab the help.

INDEPENDENT LIVING SHOULD BE A BOOT-CAMP, OR KICKED TO THE CURB AT 21!

By Rick Bullard

Independent Living should be run like a military Boot Camp, because only that kind of tough training is going to prepare us for the stress we're going to experience in the 'Real World.' It's the only way to overcome the false sense of security and dependency that the system fosters (no pun intended). We think we're always going to be taken care of, but at 21 you are out!

For those who still don't understand, I repeat - at 21, it's over! Your ass is kicked to the curb like an old pair of Lottos! Outta here like last year! Ejected quicker than an M.C. Shan tape!

Get It:

When I first moved into my Independent Living (IL) facility, I didn't think about that day. I was about to turn 18 and didn't care about anything, except the money I had in my pocket.

In my first week there, I saw that a lot of the residents didn't have a program and were waiting around to be given one, whereas I, a total maverick, made the effort to find a job within my

first week, which I kept for the next year.

For that year I pretty much took care of myself. All I did was club, sleep, and work. Not a care in the world - no drugs, no booze, just a phunkadelic free-flow of peach rhythms and grooves. To work, to club, to sleep, day after day.

The Jig Is Up:

The reason I'm telling you this will become apparent as I skip ahead three years to my last year in the facility. By now I was quickly approaching 21 and began to realize that the jig was almost up. I should have been saving money, but no one had stressed to me, in a way that would sink in, how important that was. People had told me to save, but not why or how.

So there I was a month before "aging out" - no money, no prospects, no future. Not to mention that I also had nowhere to go after discharge. Ironic, isn't it? I felt like a deer caught in the headlights of a semi-truck: doomed.

Oh well, I figured I could go play on a freeway and hope for a quick end.

It was then that I remembered what I was when I first came into I.L.: a survivor. No matter what it took, I would survive. So I grudgingly moved into my mother's one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn and it is here that I currently reside with mom and my 11-year-old sister.

Oh, and by the way - did I mention that I sleep on the couch?

I didn't intend on staying here.

Have a Plan:

That's my plan. That's the whole secret to independent living in the first place - have a plan! Even have six plans! Just in case your main plan falls through, have a set of contingency (that means backup) plans.

I wished I had more of a plan back when I was in I.L. I wished I had learned to save money. I wished I had gotten some on-the-job training, so that I could support myself with a skill. I would have liked to have some sort of housing to look forward to and I wish I had been prepared to go to college.

But None Of That Happened:

Independent Living had failed me because it did not consistently and thoroughly train me in the various aspects of living independently.

Too Little, Too Late:

To be fair, my I.L. facility did have a workshop for people like me who were about to leave in a year. It was actually quite good, because it went into a fair amount of detail on what you needed to survive on your own and was led by a facilitator who really knew her stuff.

So Why Did I Leave the System Unprepared?

Because all this information was crammed into about three months of my final year. The workshop only met once a week for about two hours! I was 20 years old and hearing this stuff for the first time. Talk about too little too late!

Start at 13:

To fully prepare me, a workshop should have been given at the beginning of my stay in I.L. and throughout the entire time of my stay there, not as a three-month crash course. In fact, now that I have passed through the storm, I know there are other changes that need to be made in how we're prepared to confront the cold, cruel Real World.

One major change should be aimed at those who don't take I.L. seriously. To repeat, Independent Living should be like a Boot Camp for four years! 'Cause unless you have a trust fund

comin' atcha at 21, you better get with the program.

Everyone who comes into I.L. should either be already working or going to school (a fair amount of the residents

Some Advice To Young Adults Who Will Soon Be Aging Out:

- Find out all the information you can. If the person you're working with doesn't have the answers, ask someone else. This is your life you're planning. Don't burn your bridges and consider every option. Begin to network with any and everybody - you'll never know who can help.
- Pay attention in workshops on independent living. Ask questions, take notes, stay alert. Save all the money you can, budget, and spend with common sense. Don't take anyone's word that your opinions are limited.
- "Suck the system dry" and use it to your advantage. This includes: money, scholarships, furniture for your new apartment, and any written or verbal recommendations or other useful resources.
- Last but not least, have no regrets about taking on challenges that don't always work out as fast as you would like them to. We can always reorganize our goals, both short and long term. Life is not written in stone and we can always learn from our mistakes.

-- Tieysha McVay

in my place weren't doing jack). Classes and training should start the moment a participant steps foot in the door of an I.L. facility.

Actually, they should start waaaaaaay before that, probably at the age of 13 or 14. An I.L. facility should be the icing on the cake, not a hurried crash course in survival.

From jump, people in I.L. should learn why saving money is so impor-

tant. When I first got to I.L., they told me to "save money." But why should I listen? Give me a reason to listen!

Show me how hard it is to find a fair-priced apartment! Talk to me about security deposits, gas and electric, the cost of hooking up a phone (not to mention budgeting for food, transportation, and clothing)! In my I.L. workshop, everything about housing was too bloody vague.

Change Transitional Housing:

As far as transitional housing goes, the various apartment programs are fairly useless, unless the residents are actually practicing the skills that were taught to them. The people who are accepted into these apartment programs should be already capable of supporting themselves. The apartment programs should be a place for them to apply the skills that they learned in I.L., not learn them from jump.

What good is it to house three or four residents in an apartment and pay for the rent, gas and electric, and food? Granted, they have to budget their food bill, but the money isn't coming from their own pockets, is it? So in preparing people for reality, that whole situation is rather futile. And at 21 they still get the boot.

Those who move into an apartment program should be working and able to carry their own weight as far as rent and the bills go, because they've already been thoroughly prepared by the I.L. facility they came from. When they turn 21, they can move on to true independent living with their own apartment.

Practical Job Information:

We also need specific, tangible job information to help us survive. I'm talking about practical things, like access to study guides for the Civil Service exams. Residents should be encouraged to take Federal and State

exams so they have at least some prospect for employment.

What can it hurt to have a fee waiver for foster care residents who want to take a Civil Service test? Look at it this way: those who pass the tests (with study and pre-test help provided by the foster care agencies) will have a chance at becoming employed and the City, State, and Federal governments will have a chance at more taxpayers. It sure as hell beats building yet another homeless shelter.

Change the Discharge Date:

And since the average person who isn't in foster care now lives at home until about 25 or 26, I think discharge at 21 is bogus - but that's another article.

In closing, the main point I'm trying to impress upon you is that you must develop your own drive to survive because one day soon the system will bid your behind a cold farewell.

Facts About Foster Care Youth

Within 2 to 4 years of leaving foster care:

- Only half have completed high school
- Fewer than half are employed
- One fourth have been homeless for at least one night
- Thirty percent did not have access to needed health care
- Sixty percent of young women have given birth
- Less than one in five is completely self-supporting

Don't ever let yourself be lulled into a false sense of security. Always remember that just because you are getting money from foster care now, does not mean you'll be getting it forever. Always have a plan of your own and do what is necessary to help yourself. Let the system help you but don't let it live for you.

A realistic Independent Living program, combined with your will to succeed, just might enable you to live comfortably.

IN THE WINGS

The following is brief description of a few of the projects in which NRCPP is currently involved. For more information about these projects, contact Sharon Karow, Information Specialist, at 212-452-7432.

Housing for Youth Project. NRCPP is working on a New York City based pilot housing project to find permanent, subsidized housing for youth "aging out" of the foster care system. Because of the critical shortage of low-income housing, adolescents moving out of foster care - often without needed family support - face the daunting challenge of finding suitable housing with few resources and limited connections. Many of these young adults do not succeed and eventually join the ranks of the City's homeless. The short-term project will work to connect young, financially independent adults soon to age out of foster care and landlords with available, affordable apartments.

Curriculum Development - Assessing Relative Caregivers. The Relative Caregivers Curriculum Project (funded by DHHS, ACYF) Children's Bureau, at

NRCPP is in high gear. During the past six months, we have completed a draft outline of the curriculum based on information gathered from a series of focus groups and from meetings with our project partners to review curriculum currently in use in the projects and to draw from the expertise of Joan Morse and Deb Adamy who have responsibility for curriculum design. In addition, we held a two-day meeting in New York City with members of the local implementation teams from Baltimore City Department of Social Services and New York City Administration for Children's Services to review the current curriculum draft and begin to identify specific training activities. As a result of this meeting, we have scheduled the first pilot training in Baltimore in early spring. We are pleased at the progress in this project and look forward to the outcome of the pilot training.

Concurrent Permanency Planning State Status Report. Lorrie Lutz, an independent consultant working with NRCPP, is compiling a survey of progress states have made in planning and implementing concurrent permanency planning initiatives. This report will be available in the Spring of 1999.

Concurrent Planning Curriculum and Train the Trainer Guide. To assist agencies across the country in their permanency planning efforts, a train-the-trainers guide on concurrent planning has been developed by Linda Katz and Rose Marie Wentz in collaboration with many individuals and organizations around the country. The project is a joint effort between the Northwest Institute for Children and Families and the National Resource Center for Permanency Planning. Copies will be available for distribution through the

Northwest Institute as well as the NRCPP by Spring 1999.

Renewing Our Commitment to Permanency for Children - Regional Forums. The NRCPP in collaboration with the Child Welfare League of America is planning a series of five regional forums on the family, organizational and community level strategies needed to renew our commitment to successful permanency planning outcomes for children. The first pilot forum is planned for April 12-14, 1999 in Washington, DC. Multi-disciplinary teams will be invited to work together to develop a plan for how that 'team' will achieve ASFA's safety and permanency mandates fairly and effectively. More will appear on this initiative in our Spring newsletter.

1999 National Roundtable on Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) and International Conference on Evaluating FGDM. May 12-14, 1999, Seattle, WA. Sponsored by the American Humane Association, and co-sponsored by NRCPP. This Roundtable has two purposes: (1) for those unfamiliar with this emerging practice, it will build participant knowledge of family group decision making in child welfare; (2) for communities that have implemented FGDM, the Roundtable will concentrate on more advanced practice, policy, and administrative issues. The format will include panel discussions, role plays, small workshops, and informal opportunities for participants to network. For more information or registration contact Mickey Schumaker at AHA: (303) 792-9900 (voice); (303)792-5333 (fax); mickey@americanhumane.org (e-mail).

UPCOMING NRCPP NEWSLETTERS

The following topics will be featured in upcoming NRCPP issues of Permanency Planning Today:

Spring 1999: Strengthening the Full Continuum of Permanency Planning -- The Safe and Stable Families Program.

June 1999: Overrepresentation of Children of Color in the Foster Care System.

If you are not currently on the NRCPP mailing list for Permanency Planning Today and would like to be added, please contact Sharon Karow by phone: (212) 452-7432 or email: skarow@shiva.cuny.hunter.edu.

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION?

The following is a listing of reports, summaries and materials available through NRCPP. Unless otherwise noted, copies can be obtained by contacting Sharon Karow at: (212) 452-7432 or email:

skarow@shiva.cuny.hunter.edu.

Listening to Youth Report: The final report of the Listening to Youth Project, highlighted in this issue of Permanency Planning Today (p 6.), describes the projects' goals and methodology, lists the interview questions and the moving, thought-provoking youth responses, and provides recommendations for change offered by the former youth in care. A copy of the report can be purchased from NRCPP for \$5.00.

Legislative Summaries: Diane Dodson, an attorney, and NRCPP consultant, has been working on summaries of major child welfare legislation for distribution. A summary of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 is complete and available upon request. Summaries of the following legislation will be available shortly: Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980; the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act; and Title I: Temporary Assistance to Needy Families of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (as it pertains to child welfare).

Wisconsin Youth in Care Study: In 1998, the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Social Work and Institute for Research on Poverty completed a multi-year project investigat-

ing the "experiences and adjustment of youth" in Wisconsin after being discharged from foster care. Initial interviews with youth participants began in 1995 while the youth were still in care and follow-up interviews were conducted 12 to 18 months after their discharge from out-of-home care. A copy of the report can be obtained online at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's web site: <http://www.wis-mad@aol.com> or by calling Sharon Karow at NRCPP.

EMU Kinship Curriculum: Kinship training materials, developed by the Eastern Michigan University Department of Social Work, can be purchased through NRCPP. Included in the materials are two manuals: The Kinship Training Program, highlighting strategies for developing extended family support for intra-familial child

placements and Family Traditions, providing guidelines for kinship caregiver forums. In addition, a kinship video series is offered: Kinship, A Family Tradition, presenting an overview of the historical context of kinship caregiving; Families Speak Out, sharing the personal stories of three kinship caregivers; and Reframing Social Work for Family Empowerment, offering professional viewpoints on social work practice with extended families.

Tools for Permanency Planning: NRCPP "Tools for Permanency" fact sheets are available on Concurrent Permanency Planning, Family Group Decision Making and Child Welfare Mediation, and can be purchased from NRCPP for \$1.50 per tool. A fourth fact sheet on kinship care will soon be available for distribution.