



Mercy Notes

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Too Old, Too Soon

“Dead. Dead in the flesh . . . and in the spirit.” That is how a young man of 20 described life for himself and other former foster youth on a Florida homeless coalition’s Web site. Two years after “aging out” of foster care, he struggles to find work, stable housing, and someone who cares.

More than 500,000 children and youth are in foster care in the United States. Aging out occurs when a child reaches age 18 without being adopted, and the state stops serving as parent. For many foster youth, the abrupt transition to adulthood is a shock. Read further about the issue www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2010/0407/Crime-unemployment-homelessness-dog-ex-foster-care-youths.

According to researchers at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, parents typically provide their children about \$38,000 in assistance between the ages of 18 and 34. Most children rely on their parents for support throughout their 20s. But the more than 20,000 youth aging out of foster care every year are expected to hit the road to adulthood running by 18. Most have little or no adult guidance or financial support.

Chapin Hall researchers join other youth advocates in stressing that youths given extended foster care are more likely to succeed and rate higher on measures of personal well-being, educational achievement, and self-sufficiency. www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/publications/ChapinHallDocument_1.pdf.

The Challenges

Foster kids have already endured the stress of parental loss, abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Their backgrounds are often tragic, and most research predicts bleak futures for them. Some of the challenges these young people face include the following:

- Up to 50 percent of foster youth become homeless within two years of emancipation.
- Homeless youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who have no family are at higher risk for physical and sexual assault and disease.
- Foster care alumni face a higher risk of unemployment, illness, incarceration, early pregnancies, mental health problems, and welfare dependency than their peers. Their own children are more likely to have health and behavioral problems.
- Less than half of former foster youth complete high school, compared to 84 percent of their peers.
- Approximately 25 percent of former foster youth develop Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), compared to 4 percent in the general population. One study found the PTSD rate for foster youth is up to twice that of United States war veterans.



Mercy forever.

All programs of LCMS World Relief and Human Care are funded by donations from caring people like you. No dollars come from the Missouri Synod’s unrestricted budget. Your generous gift to LCMS World Relief and Human Care will make a tremendous difference and help to uphold the message of Christ’s mercy to all in body and soul.



Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008

Signed into law by President Bush in October 2008, this law allows continued federal funding to states that extend foster care to age 21. But extending care is an option, not a mandate. Extending foster care beyond age 18 is difficult for states struggling to maintain existing social services. Some states cannot raise the funds necessary to qualify for a federal match. Find a summary of the law at www.fostercarealumni.org/userfiles/file/HR6893-CDsummary.pdf.

Against the odds, more than 20 percent of former foster youth succeed in life. Advocates say, given the support and love that every young person deserves, many more will have a chance to succeed.

Help from Lutheran Agencies

Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Recognized Service Organizations (RSOs) are helping foster youth prepare for the adult world. This article will focus on the efforts of two agencies. In January 2010, Lutheran Social Services of the South started BeREAL, a pilot project in New Orleans that provides mentoring and scholarships to foster teens for education and career planning. Lutheran Child & Family Service of Michigan's (LCFS) work with older foster youth includes plans to break ground this year for an affordable housing complex. Christie Kieschnick, director of Education & Career Development for BeREAL, and Dr. Robert Miles, president and CEO of LCFS of Michigan, discuss their agencies' efforts and the challenges of foster youth in the following interview.

Mercy Notes (MN): *Why do the struggles of former foster youth seem to receive less attention than other social issues, such as domestic violence, addictions, or mental illness?*

Christie Kieschnick (CK): People often tell me they had no idea the odds are so stacked against former foster

youth. The public has been shielded from their difficult situations. I have wondered if it's because our system is so protective of foster children's confidentiality. Also, making a commitment to a child is a huge undertaking. I think the public wants them to be taken care of but doesn't necessarily want to become directly involved.

Robert Miles (RM): I'm guessing that many of the people who struggle with mental illness, domestic violence, and addictions may have been in foster care at some point. There isn't a good tracking system or "bridge" to adulthood for kids aging out of foster care. Services are often difficult to access and, too often, are not coordinated to meet the multiple needs of the individual.

MN: *What are the typical challenges facing foster youth who are on their own? Can you give us an idea how many enter adult life with no family connections or assistance?*

CK: Foster youth face multiple challenges that feed off each other: financial, housing, education, sense of permanency, stability, little positive adult support and encouragement, and lack of a strong

peer network. Although social services and other agencies try to help them with permanent connections and resources, many fall through the cracks when they age out of care.

RM: There is a real void for youth aging out of foster care. Within months of leaving care, many become homeless. By the time youth are ready to move into independent living, many are sick of the system and no longer want to work within it. This cuts them off from a dependable biweekly stipend for housing costs and the support of a case worker.

Foster youth are typically discharged when they move into an inappropriate living situation — such as with a boyfriend, their birth parents, or other individuals not approved due to criminal histories or substance abuse. Some foster youth get involved with substances and illegal activities. Some get pregnant and must be discharged after having their babies.

Many foster youth stay connected with former foster parents, even if they left the family in less than ideal circumstances. Some reunite with their birth families. Others reconnect with former foster parents and become adult family



photo by Zanetra Hardy

members. Some youth simply keep moving from one friend's home to another. They have difficulty finding jobs due to poor social skills, and they change jobs frequently due to low tolerance of coworkers or supervisors. I think most youth have some kind of connection, whether it is friends, family, or foster family.

MN: *Would you like to share a success story with readers?*

CK: One of our 19-year-olds is struggling with math and trying to obtain her General Educational Development (GED) certificate. A former high school math teacher offered to tutor her. The young lady is responding very well and is on track to get her GED soon.

We have begun a Transitioning Foster Youth Community Collaborative, which brings together community stakeholders [who have] a vested interest in foster youth successfully transitioning to adulthood. Our first meeting brought together 10 different agencies, entities, and perspectives, including the faith-based community and foster youth. The group will continue to meet and invite more foster youth and community stakeholders into the discussion.

RM: We have a young lady attending Western Michigan University through the Seita Scholarship. She has had a very difficult time with her mental health and emotional stability. Since a case worker helped her find the services she needs, she is doing better, is in her second year, and lives on campus.

Though his circumstances differed from the foster youth who age out of care, we would like to share the story of trooper Sanders, now the deputy director of Policy and Projects for first lady Michelle Obama. www.lcms.org/ca/worldrelief/resources/mercynotes/LCFSNewsletterMay09.pdf

MN: *Tell us about your program to help foster youth become successful adults.*

CK: BeREAL is a pilot initiative serving 10 foster youth ages 13 and up in the New Orleans area www.lsss.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=966. We plan to expand the program this summer and, hopefully, replicate it in other cities and states in the future. Youth are referred to us by the Office of Community Services and must apply for the program. They receive three types of support:

(1) A staff transition coach coordinates a youth's program through assessments, helps develop an education and career plan with specific goals and objectives, assists the youth in achieving those goals and objectives, matches the youth with a community mentor, and supervises that process;

(2) The mentor establishes a long-term, consistent relationship with a youth and assists with his or her education and career plans. "Gap team" volunteers help with short-term, specific needs such as tutoring, college applications, completing tax forms, etc.;

(3) Funding is available for education and career needs not provided by the state, such as tuition, books, fees, computers, work uniforms, transportation, etc. BeREAL youth may apply for this funding as needed. www.lcms.org/ca/worldrelief/resources/mercynotes/BeRealTrifold102009.pdf

RM: We have a staff member who works specifically with most of the "Independent Living" youth. She develops a contract with each youth, which is renewed each quarter. Together, they develop a budget and look for appropriate housing. The worker also helps each individual complete school paperwork and job applications. Some of this process may occur while the youth is still in family foster care. We require the staff member to meet with each youth monthly, but she has contact via phone many times each week and sees them as needed.

LCFS is breaking ground in 2010 for the construction of Oakman Place, an affordable housing complex of 20 apartments. Ten of the units will be designated for homeless youth. www.lcms.org/ca/worldrelief/resources/mercynotes/LCFSNewsletter2010.pdf

MN: *What can congregations or individuals do to help these young people?*

CK: We welcome individuals as general program volunteers, gap team volunteers, mentors, and sponsors. You can learn more about these roles in our brochure. We also welcome congregation partners interested in sponsoring a specific BeREAL youth with birthday and Christmas gifts or other items. Some congregations provide bus passes, cloth-

Further Reading and Resources

- Learn about Western Michigan University's (WMU) Seita Scholarship, a tuition scholarship program for youth leaving the foster care system www.wmich.edu/fyit/scholarship.html. Going to college is only a dream for most foster youth as explained in www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/05/27/foster.
- Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest opened a center in Arizona to help foster youth transition to adulthood. Read www.lss-sw.org/news.asp#pub.
- Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska (www.lfsneb.org) developed Right Turn, a support program for post-adoptive parents and guardians. Right Turn (www.rightturnne.org/) offers counseling, respite care, and other help to enable successful long-term placement and a better outcome for foster kids.. View a Right Turn success story at www.ketv.com/video/23434042/index.html.

ing, office supplies, furniture, and recreational items for our center. We encourage anyone interested in volunteering or providing donations to call or e-mail me at 504-931-3408, christie.kieschnick@lsss.org.

RM: Appropriate, affordable housing is difficult to find. It would be great, if individuals have room in their homes to welcome a youth in Independent Living. These individuals would not become the [foster] parents but would be more like landlords, though they could also provide support and mentoring.

Congregations might prepare care baskets filled with items a youth needs to go out on their own. The Department of Human Services provides start-up funds for each youth. But if that money does not need to be used to buy dishes, sheets, and other household items, it could be used for other things a young person needs but typically cannot afford.

Mentors can be so helpful. Sometimes they are the difference between

youth “holding on” while waiting for employment or school enrollment and succumbing to the temptations of easy money selling drugs. One of our mentors is a managing partner of a CPA firm. He meets twice a week with one of our kids who left care at 16 and is now 20. This mentor is truly on a life’s journey with this young man.

Individual members could be instrumental in helping identify internships in their businesses for kids coming out of the system. The ability to learn a trade or get a job (beyond fast food) could literally transform a young person’s future.

We need to lift up kids and families in the foster care system in prayer.

Sources: CNN.com, Casey Family Programs, Coalition for the Homeless of Central Florida, Congress.org, Inside Higher Ed, Lutheran Child & Family Service of Michigan, Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska, Lutheran Social Services of the South, National Alliance to End Homelessness, Society for Research in Child Development, *The Seattle Times*, Western Michigan University

From the Hill

- Dr. Donald Berwick, nominated by President Obama to head the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), admires Britain’s National Health Service (NHS). Notorious for its rationing of medical care and denial of treatments, the NHS has decided that, for most patients, \$44,305 is the total it will spend for one year of extended life. Berwick says government must control patients’ health care spending so that “rational collective action overrides individual self-interest.” He calls NHS, which has set a price on the value of human life, a “global treasure.” Read further at www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=11851.

- This June 7 story says Britain is broke, thanks to its reliance on public debt to fund programs ranging from education to health care. As a result, the National Health Service, deemed superior

by Berwick, announced it will eliminate millions of surgical procedures, including hip replacements for obese patients, some hernia and gallstone surgeries, cataract surgeries, and more. Read more at www.investors.com/NewsAndAnalysis/Article.aspx?id=536549.

- Find a comparison of current health care in the United States compared to Britain and other nations with government-run health care at www.ncpa.org/pub/ba649.

- One analyst says a mistake was made in drafting the new health care law. The legislation contains no “severability” clause. If any portion of the law is ruled unconstitutional, the entire law will be scrapped. Read more at www.investors.com/NewsAndAnalysis/Article.aspx?id=534458.

Learn More

Log onto <http://thomas.loc.gov> for the complete text of bills and for further information, including the current status of any bill and the names of sponsoring representatives.

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• The **Positive Alternatives Act (H.R. 636)** was introduced Jan. 22 by Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.). This bill would allow the use of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds for alternative services to abortion, including counseling that promotes childbirth and other services to assist women in carrying children to term. There were 34 cosponsors (Rep.).

• **H.R. 4505** was introduced Jan. 26 by William H. “Mac” Thornberry (R-Texas). **H.R. 4505** would enable state homes to provide nursing home care to parents whose children died while serv-

ing in the military. There are 30 cosponsors (15 Dem., 15 Rep.).

• Check “The Hill’s Lawmaker Ratings” to learn how 31 advocacy groups rated each member of Congress at <http://thehill.com/resources/lawmaker-ratings>. All legislators have been scored on issues including abortion, immigration, taxes, and more.

• Track your legislators’ votes when Congress is in session and give them feedback at www.congress.org/congressorg/megavote/.

Brief Notes

• Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer, an LCMS member, recently signed a number of pro-life and pro-family laws. Find them on the Center for Arizona Policy Web site at <http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs035/1011047932616/archive/1103391645754.html>.

• The primary care physician shortage is worsening as doctors, mostly those in primary care, opt out of providing Medicare services. Read more at www.chron.com/dispatch/story.mpl/metro-politan/7009807.html.

Sources: CATO Institute, Center for Arizona Policy, Congress.org, govtrack.us, Investors.com, National Center for Policy Analysis, The Hill

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Mercy forever.

This July, mercy is on the move!

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