

Child Welfare Watch

IN TRANSITION:

A better future for youth leaving foster care



THIS SPECIAL DOUBLE edition of *Child Welfare Watch* looks at young adults' search for stability after foster care. Our focus is on housing, early parenthood, and how the city—which has full legal responsibility for foster children—can refocus resources to better support young people and their families in the transitional years of their late teens and early 20s.

Last year, more than 1,100 New Yorkers aged 18 or older left the city's foster care system. A few were enrolled in college. Others found steady jobs and affordable places to live. But many more were on the insecure fringes of the economy, without stable housing or income. About 15 percent of young people leaving foster care in New York during the middle part of this decade ended up in a homeless shelter within two years, half of them with children of their own, according to an internal city review.

There's no shortage of attention paid to the difficulties faced by young people aging out of foster care. For more than a decade, philanthropists and innovators have tried new strategies to help older foster youth. Public officials in New York have reshaped foster care in hopes of promoting strong relationships with helpful adults and better preparation for adulthood. Yet the situation remains troubling. There are fewer

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CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS
THE NEW SCHOOL

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- While the number of children in New York City foster care has fallen, the percentage of the system that is composed of young adults aged 18 to 21 has grown from 9 percent in 2001 to more than 13 percent today. (See chart, page 13.)
- About 15 percent of young people aging out of foster care entered the homeless shelter system within two years, according to a recent internal city data analysis. This rate is even higher than an earlier study had found. (See "Aging out of Foster Care With Babies of Their Own," page 9.)
- The number of families and children in ACS-funded preventive family support programs has fallen sharply, down 30 percent between September 2008 and September 2010. This fall, the number of children in preventive programs had fallen 23 percent in just one year, to 23,055. (See "Crisis in Family Services," page 6.)
- New York City doesn't keep track of how many young women in foster care become pregnant or have babies. In one national study, the birth rate for girls in foster care was double that of their peers outside the system. (See "Pregnancy and Parenting in Foster Care," page 16.)
- Eight local nonprofit organizations have established a pioneering housing initiative to reduce rates of homelessness among young adults, providing supportive housing to 400 young people aging out of institutions—including foster care—or living in shelters. (See "A Home for Five More Years," page 23.)

children in foster care than there were 10 years ago, so fewer are leaving foster care each year. Yet the rate at which they age out of the system and into extreme poverty appears to be at least as high as it was then. Increasingly, researchers of brain development and human behavior consider the late teens and early 20s to be a transitional period between adolescence and adulthood. Independence is a goal, but not always a reality.

The news is not all bad. New York City has begun to implement inventive solutions. While young people may leave foster care at 18, a rapidly growing number are now choosing to remain until age 21. In general, the assumption has always been that shorter stays in foster care are better. But research has shown that those who leave foster care at age 21 are more likely than those who leave at 18 or 19 to obtain an array of useful benefits to help with the transition to independence. In fact, some may attend college while still on the foster care rolls.

Two hundred young people leaving care moved into supported housing as part of the New York/New York III program. This is a unique, high-intensity approach to preparing young people aged 18 to 25 to live on their own after years in group homes and other institutions. Our reporting describes a few creative organizations figuring out how best to work with young adults without being overbearing and driving them away. It's an innovative method for supporting young adults while they begin to experience independence.

Unfortunately, housing options are shrinking. Federal rent vouchers are increasingly hard to get and the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) is shutting down its own Subsidized Independent Living Program, which has apartments for 125 young people.

On a positive note, the city has deployed the Nurse Family Partnership to work with more than 100 young mothers in the foster care system, providing them with health education, parenting advice, and more (see "Learning to be a Mom," page 19). For now, this program serves only a fraction of the young moms in foster care. New York City doesn't keep track of how many pregnant or parenting young women it has in its foster care programs, so we don't know how much more needs to be done.

One of the surest ways to become and remain poor is to be a young, single mother. In New York, about two-thirds of all families with children living in poverty are headed by a single mother. As you will read in this report, there is a lot that can be done to improve opportunities for young mothers, and to help young people in foster care to make good decisions about family planning.

Ultimately, the best way to prevent young people from aging out of foster care is to not place them there in the first place. But effective alternatives cost money: Domestic violence advocacy, drug and alcohol treatment programs, housing vouchers, childcare. Most such programs are already being cut back, and officials expect more cuts to come.

Preventive family supports are being carved away, but the result could well be a surge in expensive foster care. Last spring, even after the City Council acted to reverse a sharp cut in family support programs funded by ACS, the city failed to restore previous levels of service. The most recent data reveal a continuing collapse in the number of children and families served. As of September 2010, just 11,553 families took part in city-funded preventive programs, down 19 percent from the same month in 2009 and nearly 30 percent from September 2008. Similarly, the total number of children in preventive programs is down 23 percent since a year ago, to 23,055.

Unless the city wants more children to enter foster care, and more young adults to age out into a struggle with extreme poverty, it will need to ensure that its preventive services remain intact and help more families, not fewer.

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Strengthening policy to improve supports for families is central to the founding mission of *Child Welfare Watch*. This project was created in 1997 at the Center for an Urban Future (CUF). Since 2002, it has been a joint effort of CUF with the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School. This edition marks the end of that long and productive collaboration. As of 2010, *Child Welfare Watch* is fully based at The New School. We are truly grateful for CUF's many years of assistance, particularly on the publishing side of the operation.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

YOUNG PEOPLE we interviewed for this report have high aspirations. Some will go on to college and find success despite difficulties in their lives. But today, hundreds of young New Yorkers leave foster care each year and end up in homeless shelters, often with their own small children in tow. Many more spend years struggling to find an adequate income and a stable home. Highly respected research studies of former foster children in their late teens and early 20s have found shockingly low employment rates and incomes, and few of these young people attending college or vocational programs. In one recent study, more than half the young women were mothers by age 19.

Much has been tried in the past to reform the way government and nonprofit agencies work with teens to prepare for life beyond foster care, yet resources and commitment have invariably faded with time. This must change or the results will not. The recommendations that follow, proposed by the *Child Welfare Watch* advisory board, describe much-needed steps the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), foster care agencies and others should take to help young people transition to a more stable adulthood.

FOSTER CARE AGENCIES MUST BASE THEIR WORK WITH TEENS ON THE PRINCIPLE THAT PREPARING FOR ADULTHOOD IS FUNDAMENTAL TO ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT.

ACS should set firm standards and sanctions to ensure foster care agencies provide older teens with life coaching, real-life experiential learning about educational employment opportunities, skills training and career development, and frequent one-on-one planning sessions about life after foster care. One model that has shown great promise in initial evaluations is The Academy, a project of F.E.G.S Health & Human Services System, which has worked with about 400 young people in foster care since 2007. Some agencies also provide foundation-funded coaching, counseling and other services, but most young people aging out of foster care do not have these opportunities.

Counseling must include well-stated, carefully reinforced information about the right to stay in foster care until age 21, and why remaining in care can bring material benefits. Most important, foster parents for teens must be fully trained and supported in their work with older teens to reinforce the fact that they are responsible for helping young people prepare for the future.

ACS MUST CREATE ENFORCEABLE STANDARDS AND ADEQUATE FUNDING FOR FOSTER CARE AGENCIES TO ENSURE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE CONNECTED TO MEANINGFUL ASSISTANCE EVEN AFTER LEAVING FOSTER CARE.

ACS regulations are vague about what's required in terms of supporting young people after they leave the system. Foster

care agencies must "provide supervision" after discharge for some young people until age 21, but there are neither clear guidelines about what supervision is required nor money allocated for it. Some agencies provide minimal supervision—such as infrequent telephone calls—while others make significant investments in family support and counseling. ACS should require that agencies take steps to ensure that young people have adults to turn to who will help or intervene in situations that can derail the transition from foster care, whether it's a conflict with a parent or grandmother about life at home; a pregnancy or child-care issue; a lack of money to help pay a share of the rent, or some other escalating crisis. ACS should establish enforceable standards for at least six months to one year of family or individual assistance, including for young adults moving home with parents or siblings, as well as educational and vocational advocacy.

THE MAYOR, CITY COUNCIL AND ACS SHOULD PROVIDE FUNDS TO HIRE YOUNG PEOPLE AS PEER ADVOCATES IN NONPROFIT AGENCIES AND GOVERNMENT.

Current and former foster youth who have found success or become leaders in their communities, schools or families should be seen as a resource for mentoring, policymaking, and peer support. Training and employment models for youth leadership and peer advocacy should be adapted to foster care programs. New peer networks, mentoring and policymaking roles for young people who are succeeding, despite the hurdles, will cultivate invaluable

first-hand knowledge for everyone in the system, teens and adults alike. With more than 1,100 young people 18 and older leaving foster care each year, the potential for ongoing, organized participation is large and barely tapped.

ACS AND FOSTER CARE AGENCIES SHOULD PUT FAR MORE RESOURCES INTO STRENGTHENING FAMILIES—including families to which YOUNG ADULTS WILL LIKELY RETURN.

Research shows that the majority of young people aging out of foster care maintain contact with their families. If their parents and siblings are able to provide a place to live, young people with few financial resources will go home. But when an older child has been in foster care for years, his or her family has likely been abandoned by the system without any support and may have few resources to share. Attention must be paid to strengthening these families while the opportunity exists.

Foster care agencies must be accountable for helping young people aging out of care forge strong relationships with adults who can provide meaningful help and emotional support. Some young people leaving care reconnect with parents and relatives. Others have strong friends, teachers, mentors or former foster parents who carry them through. Nonetheless, many report a high degree of isolation and lack of emotional support to help them deal with economic and social stress. City government policy requires that foster care agencies and ACS help every young person 17 years old or older leaving foster care to identify adults

"within the youth's life who will offer the emotional and social support needed to sustain discharge from foster care." Agencies and ACS need to identify these supportive adults and, if necessary, provide them with meaningful resources. This includes, for parents, eliminating barriers imposed by prior terminations of parental rights. There should be sanctions for poorly performing agencies.

ACS AND ITS FOSTER CARE AGENCIES SHOULD PROVIDE COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION AND FAMILY PLANNING SERVICES TO TEENS IN THEIR CARE.

We wrote in these pages eight years ago: "All teens in foster care must be assured ready access to information on birth control and sexuality, including abortion. ACS needs to establish more specific guidelines for all agencies, including those that are religiously affiliated, and then monitor compliance and sanction inadequate performance." Today, all agencies are required to tell teens where to get birth control. But simply referring a young person to a clinic isn't adequate: Many clinics have no special capacity to work with teenagers, much less foster teens who are far more likely than their peers to become parents at an early age. Some agencies have formed partnerships with outside organizations—including foster care agencies such as Inwood House that have formidable expertise in this area—to provide honest, accurate family planning services, education and advice. But our earlier recommendation remains largely unrealized. ACS should require foster care agencies to implement a measurable family planning program for young men and women, and it must include information on birth control, sexuality and abortion. All foster care agencies, regardless of their religious affiliations and beliefs, must be held to these standards.

ACS SHOULD TAKE STEPS TO STABILIZE HOUSING FOR YOUNG WOMEN BEFORE AND AFTER CHILDBIRTH.

In 2011, ACS intends to eliminate 100 congregate care beds for young women who are pregnant or parenting. Unfortunately, a large percentage of foster families are unable or unwilling to house young women with babies or toddlers. Pregnant girls often end up in maternity residences with a plan to move into mother-child group homes after their babies are born. These programs are unable to reserve spots for young

women who have not given birth, so young mothers-to-be often have no idea where they will live once their babies are born. If a placement cannot be found—a process that frequently happens while a young woman is in labor—new mothers may be forced to live separately from their babies for a period of days or weeks. As ACS initiates a new 'blended' licensing model for programs that work with pregnant and parenting young women—under which maternity residences will be able to house babies as well as pregnant girls—it must ensure that agencies are able to provide continuous care for young women before and after childbirth, minimizing disruptions for young mothers during an already chaotic time of life.

ACS SHOULD PLACE YOUNG MOTHERS IN THE SAME HOME AS THEIR BABIES.

When child protective services removes a baby from a young mother in foster care as a result of alleged neglectful parenting, ACS should make every effort to place the young mother and baby together with a foster parent who is specifically trained and supported to work with young parents. These teenagers should have the opportunity to continue bonding with their children and to learn essential parenting skills in a safe and supported environment.

Young mothers often say that they are threatened with neglect reports for violating rules that do not directly endanger the well-being of their babies, such as breaking curfews or missing appointments. When they face what they perceive to be a hostile environment, they are more likely to leave the foster care system, missing opportunities for stable housing and employment plans, and increasing the likelihood that they and their children will end up homeless. ACS and its contract agencies should also encourage young fathers to be part of their babies' lives. At group homes in particular, a father's visit should not depend on a young mom's good behavior.

AGENCIES AND ACS SHOULD MAKE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND GRADUATION A TOP PRIORITY FOR TEENS IN FOSTER CARE—INCLUDING TEEN PARENTS.

The hurdles facing teen mothers in foster care are huge. But adults don't help when they routinely schedule health care and other appointments during the day, when these young women could be in school.

Caseworkers, group home staff and foster parents often assume they will at best complete a GED. This assumption must be turned on its head. Young people's future economic independence depends on meaningful preparation either in vocational school or higher education, and this must be among the city's objectives for every teen in foster care. The low expectations of adults in young peoples' lives can be self-fulfilling.

THE CITY SHOULD RESTORE THE SUPPORTED INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM (SILP) AND CREATE MORE SUPPORTIVE HOUSING FOR YOUNG ADULTS AND YOUNG PARENTS LEAVING CARE.

Young adults need a chance to practice living independently before they are completely on their own. Experts say that young adults should have the opportunity to make—and learn from—mistakes as they become independent. The SILP program provided 125 young adults in foster care this opportunity, but ACS has shut it down. We urge ACS to keep SILP in operation, or, at the very least, convert its apartments into supportive housing for young adults leaving foster care.

Young adults can participate in NY/NY III supported housing program only after they have left foster care or are on a six-month trial discharge. If they are evicted for tenant violations or failing to pay rent, they may well become homeless. Instead, if young adults could move into these apartments before they age out of care, they would have the chance to practice being independent while a safety net remains in place, along with access to clinical services.

THE STATE OFFICE OF MENTAL HEALTH MUST CREATE BETTER OPTIONS FOR YOUNG ADULTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES.

Providers of supportive housing say they are sometimes overwhelmed by the scope and intensity of the mental health issues facing young people in their apartments and buildings. Learning groups for provider agency front-line staff and administrators have helped them share information and best practices and brainstorm solutions. These should be a routine part of this work, particularly for agencies used to working with older adults, who have very different needs. The state could also fund clinical consultants to be on-call to assist caseworkers in these programs.

The Quest for Speedy Justice

BY KENDRA HURLEY

A NEW POLICY designed to ensure that parents accused of abuse or neglect get a speedy trial has turned out to be surprisingly controversial. While most everybody agrees that it's important to move cases in Family Court more quickly, some advocates, lawyers and judges fear a new plan by the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) to ensure that all cases go to trial within 60 days could backfire, resulting in more—not fewer—delays, because it may result in fewer out-of-court settlements.

ACS lacks the authority to make decisions about how Family Court is run. However, in an effort to reduce lengthy delays, ACS instructed its lawyers on July 1 to prepare their cases for trial within 60 days of the filing. It also asked Family Court to schedule fact-finding hearings (as trials in Family Court are called) within that time. While a 60-day limit on going to trial may sound like a good idea, it often takes more time to reach a settlement—and many parents' attorneys and judges say settlements are better for all concerned. Some 80 percent of all Family Court cases never go to trial at all because they are settled, according to an ACS review of court data.

Out-of-court settlements take a number of forms. In rare instances, ACS may agree to withdraw a case if evidence is weak. More often, a parent admits guilt and agrees to take part in services such as drug treatment, counseling or parenting classes. A third form of settlement represents a compromise: A parent does not admit guilt but agrees to accept services for a certain amount of time; if the parent complies, then the case is dismissed. This third form of settlement, known by the initials ACD for adjournment in contemplation of dismissal, can take many months to arrange.

"Speed by itself doesn't always equate justice," says Sue Jacobs, executive director of the Center for Family Representation in Manhattan, which represents hundreds of Manhattan parents in Family Court each year.

The court has long suffered delays. Many cases linger for years without resolution. For children who have been removed from their families, the delays can be devastating. An average of eight months passes between the time the city files a petition of abuse or neglect and the fact-finding hearing, according to ACS. Nonetheless, the policy change is contentious.

"In 60 days, you may not have enough information about the strength of ACS's case or the family's progress to have a meaningful conversation about settlement," says Michele Cortese, deputy director of the Center for Family Representation in Manhattan. Some attorneys say a more flexible range of 60 to 120 days until trial might give parents a better shot at demonstrating to ACS their ability to parent and give ACS more time to decide if a case can be settled.

"Attorneys should be litigating only the cases that can't be settled," says Cortese.

Before agreeing to an ACD (or adjournment in contemplation of dismissal), ACS may want to see evidence that a mother with postpartum depression has bonded with her baby or that a parent struggling with drug addiction has stayed clean. Moreover, in neighborhoods with long wait lists for counseling or housing, it can sometimes take longer than two months just to access services. (Some attorneys believe that ACS should begin offering ACDs before a parent has already begun receiving services.)

Settling cases saves court resources: a judge may sign a settlement order in 15 minutes, whereas a fact-finding hearing and disposition hearing (as sentencing is called in Family Court) may take hours of court time and months of delays.

"Settling a case means faster resolution," says Family Court Judge Susan Danoff. "It means less court time for adjournments and trial. It also means, for families, that it's more likely they can have a record expunged." A record of abuse or neglect can prevent adults from working certain jobs.

Gilbert Taylor, deputy commissioner of Family Court Legal Services at ACS, counters that the policy change will result in more timely settlements. "We believe that achieving timely adjudication will actually facilitate parents entering into services faster than had typically been the case when court cases dragged on and on," he wrote in an emailed statement. "With the fact-finding order in place, the court will have the authority to compel parental engagement in services sooner than later, which might allow for more ready settlement of cases at the dispositional phase of the proceeding."

Some attorneys representing parents say ACS is right to speed up the timetable for trials.

"It's just horrible when you have a child who has been in foster care for a year, then two years, and then when the fact-finding hearing is held the courts find out that in fact there's no case to begin with," says David Lansner of Lansner & Kubitschek family law. "That's the attitude, that everyone accused in Family Court is guilty and needs help and services just to prove that they're good parents," he says. "In fact, what a lot of parents need is simply justice and speedy justice, because they never did anything wrong to begin with."

ACS officials say they are hopeful the plan will help them clear a backlog of cases. But so far, chipping away at the backlog has turned out to be much more difficult than they had hoped. "We're trying to move a culture of delay," says Taylor.

A day in Family Court shows what some of the roadblocks to justice can be. In Danoff's courtroom one recent morning, she heard the case of a 14-year-old girl whose brother, her caretaker, had been charged with neglect—three years ago. Now, no one knew where the girl was; she had not been placed in foster care, and she was last seen prostituting herself near the cemetery in the Bronx where her father was buried. The lawyer assigned to her case had nothing to say during the trial. He hadn't spoken to her since 2007, the year ACS first filed the case.

In the past, Danoff says, she may have adjourned the case and set a new court date. This time, Danoff didn't. She ruled neglect, and ordered ACS to provide the brother with services until the girl turned 21 the following year. Danoff says she is making every effort not to let any cases languish in Part 4, the section of Family Court she oversees. "It's fish or cut bait," she says.

When she hears that attorneys have found a way to settle a case instead of taking it to trial, Danoff says she now stops whatever she's doing—even if it means interrupting a trial—and signs off on the settlement. For every case she's had on her docket for too long, she says, she tries to determine if there's a

way she might help ACS and the family to settle.

At another fact-finding hearing, the attorneys approach Danoff's bench. The ACS attorney says she isn't prepared for trial. She was hoping to be able to settle so that a trial wouldn't be necessary, but one of her superiors at ACS overruled her. Because she just learned that her boss did not agree to the settlement, she has not had time to prepare a 9-year-old girl to testify that her mother's boyfriend had, indeed, molested her.

The judge is not happy. She's set aside over an hour for this case, time that may now be wasted. "There are no adjournments in Part 4!" she scolds the attorney, pointing out that the court date had been set more than six months before. "You should have made certain you were prepared to go forward."

The child's mother speaks up, her voice crackling with emotion. "With them keep adjourning it, I'm being monitored," she says. "I feel re-victimized constantly." But Danoff knows that for the sake of the 9-year-old, she has little choice. She rolls her chair over to her computer to check her calendar and see what future cases might be bumped to make room for this one. The three lawyers open their date books to block off a new time. ✖

Crisis in Family Services

The number of families in preventive programs has dropped sharply.

BY ABIGAIL KRAMER

THE FAMILY SUPPORT system designed to keep children safe at home and out of foster care has been in crisis since late spring, following threats of budget cuts, problems with contract administration and changes in policy at the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS). Despite an influx of emergency funding, the number of families taking part in preventive service programs—which provide families in crisis with everything from counseling and case man-

agement to drug treatment and housekeeping—was down nearly 30 percent in September compared with two years ago, ACS data show.

The number of children taking part in preventive programs dropped by nearly one-quarter in just the last year. And new enrollments have also plummeted, with the latest figures showing a 30 percent decline since September 2009. Advocates fear a dramatic reversal of a core city policy long intended to protect kids from neglect and abuse while parents receive help to cope with extreme poverty, domestic violence, mental illness and other difficulties.

The disclosure comes in the wake of the September death of a malnourished, medically fragile 4-year-old Brooklyn girl, Marchella Pierce, whose mother has been charged with assault, drug possession and endangering the welfare of a child. The family had been receiving preventive services from the nonprofit Child Development Support Corporation, but the agency apparently stopped monitoring the family when its contract with ACS ended in June.

Preventive service programs have been hit by a triple whammy of budget cuts, operational errors and strategic planning decisions that many advocates describe as both short-sighted and dangerous. Community-based organizations in Brooklyn and the Bronx report that parents seeking help are being placed on waiting lists, despite their urgent needs for services. "It's a train wreck," says Michael Arsham, executive

director of the Child Welfare Organizing Project, a self-help and advocacy organization of parents involved with the child welfare system. “The provider community is in chaos.”

Officials deny the situation reflects a change in their commitment to keeping children out of foster care whenever it’s possible to keep them safe at home. “We are working to increase referrals back into preventive services,” says ACS spokesperson Michael Fagan.

Preventive services were originally on the city’s chopping block last spring. In anticipation of a budget squeeze, and as part of a plan to provide more intensive services over shorter periods of time, the agency planned for a reduction of 2,400 (out of about 11,000) preventive service slots.

But by April, when ACS finished evaluating proposals from nonprofit organizations seeking new contracts, 600 more slots had fallen to budget cuts. Nine agencies were told they wouldn’t be awarded contracts with the city, and many more were instructed to shrink their services and begin closing or transferring cases.

Administrators at preventive service agencies describe the period of caseload reduction as disorganized and painful. “It’s not possible to cut 3,000 cases without putting children in danger,” says Robert Gutheil, the executive director of Episcopal Social Services of New York, which was slated to lose nearly 50 slots at its Bronx preventive service site. “You have no choice but to reduce intake, which means only those with the most glaringly obvious problems are going to get any attention. Just as night follows day, we’re going to have horror stories.”

More than two months into the caseload cuts, a whole new layer of chaos hit the system when ACS announced it had made a mistake in scoring the contract proposals, and that its award recommendations, which had sent agencies scrambling in the first place, would be rescinded. Meanwhile, in June, the City Council announced it would restore funding for 2,900 of the 3,000 lost preventive service slots.

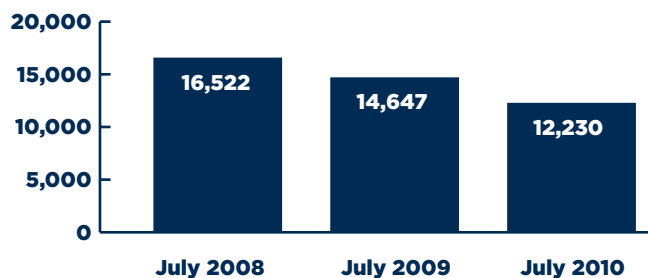
ACS sent a memo to its nonprofit providers, asking them to ramp back up to their previous service levels. But by that time, many agencies were well into shut-down mode. Several had laid off staff, some had terminated leases and many had announced to clients they were cutting back on services.

“It’s more than fair to say that hundreds of families fell out of the system,” says Sophine Charles, a program director at Steinway Child and Family Services, which was scheduled to close after it didn’t receive a contract award from ACS. “Now we’re required to go back to our original utilization rates, but it’s starting from scratch. How do you hire staff when your funding is only secure for the next eight months?”

The number of families participating in preventive services fell from more than 15,200 in June 2009 to just 11,553 in September 2010, according to ACS data. New enrollments fell from more than 1,100 in the month of March 2010 to just 668 during September. Many families must enroll in these programs under court order; others attend voluntarily

ACTIVE PREVENTIVE CASES FROM 2008-2010

With the number of new enrollments falling rapidly this past summer, the total number of families in preventive programs was dramatically lower than in 2008.



Source: NYC ACS Monthly Flash, August, 2010

with the encouragement of child-protective caseworkers, or they are referred by social workers, physicians or others in their communities.

In late September, ACS announced its new, rescored contract award recommendations, which will go into effect in July 2011. No one knows yet whether those groups will receive funding for the 2,900 slots that were restored by the City Council for the current fiscal year, which ends in June 2011. ACS has tried to help nonprofit agencies plan for the future by telling them how many additional slots they can expect to operate if preventive service funding is restored again next year. Officials say they are committed to working with agencies to keep services available in the meantime. But service providers say they are stuck in the same dilemma they faced in June: If they ramp services back up now, they may well have to cut them, drastically and quickly, next year.

In fact, the mayor’s office announced further preventive cuts in late November, this time to ACS homemaking services for families at risk of having children placed in foster care.

Public Advocate Bill de Blasio has launched an inquiry into preventive service reductions, linking the cuts to Pierce’s death. In a letter to ACS Commissioner John Mattingly, de Blasio called on the agency to review every case that was closed during the April-to-July reduction period. “The heart-breaking circumstances surrounding Marchella Pierce’s death raise troubling questions about ACS policies and practices and the possibility of systemic problems that could leave an untold number of children at risk,” he wrote.

Mattingly has since said that the provider agency plans to review a sample of the cases affected by program closures. “While the closedown process does not appear to be the primary contributing factor in this child’s death, it does raise the question of how carefully these closures or transfers are occurring,” he testified at the council hearing. ✖



During the last year, Cherry has lived with her son, Eric, in three mother-baby group homes.

Aging Out of Foster Care With Babies of Their Own

Young moms face tough odds.

BY ABIGAIL KRAMER

EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD Chantilly, who spent 13 years in foster care in more than 20 homes, knows exactly what she wants for her baby daughter, Chantasia: “One place to live, where all her stuff is, and she doesn’t have to worry about whether she’s going to be there tomorrow.”

When Chantasia was born last year, Chantilly’s foster agency offered her a place in a group home for young moms and their babies. If she’d taken it, she would have been entitled to three more years of guaranteed support and shelter, a stipend for the baby and, most likely, money for college. But Chantilly was tired of living on other people’s terms. She signed herself out of foster care two weeks after her 18th birthday. “You become a mother,” she says, “and you want your own.”

Her own, however, has been exceedingly hard to get.

After six months of sleeping on couches and living room floors, Chantilly and Chantasia ran out of friends and ended up in a city homeless shelter. Since then, Chantilly’s done everything she could think of to get herself and her daughter out of homelessness: She earned her GED, found a paid internship, applied to a nursing program, and—with the help of a housing specialist at the shelter—got a voucher from the city that will pay rent on her own apartment for two years.

The problem is, after six months of calling real estate agents, viewing apartments and filling out applications, she can’t find a landlord who’s willing to take her. “They see you’re young and you have a baby and you’re working at an internship,” she says. “They turn you down quick.”

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No one keeps track of how many young women in the foster care system get pregnant or have babies, though it’s clear from scattered studies that the numbers are high. When researchers at the University of Chicago surveyed current and former foster youth in three Midwest states, they found that more than half were living with young children by age 21. The National Casey Alumni Study, which followed foster care alumni from 23 communities around the country, found the birth rate for girls in care was more than double the rate of their peers outside the system.

As with any adolescent who becomes an adult in foster care, the goal of the city’s Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) is to get young moms ready to hold down jobs, pay their own bills and live independent, self-sufficient lives—starting with a safe and stable place to live. By law, foster agencies are responsible for making sure their charges have a secure housing plan before discharging them from care.

But the reality is that pregnant and parenting foster youth age out into a tough city and even tougher odds. They live with the standard list of obstacles that face kids who become adults in the system—chronically low education rates, poor employment histories, broken connections and relationships—added to the challenges of raising a child under what can be profoundly daunting conditions: young, nearly always single and, often, very much alone in the world.

Of all the factors that increased a former foster youth's likelihood of becoming homeless, being a mother was far and away the most predictive.

Twice in the last decade, ACS put numbers to a problem that advocates who work with young moms in the community have long suspected: At an alarming rate, and especially for women with children, housing plans fall apart.

In 2001, ACS and the city's Department of Homeless Services turned over their databases to a researcher from the University of Pennsylvania named Dennis Culhane. Culling through 15 years of records, Culhane was able to track a steady march of kids from foster care to adult homeless shelters: Of nearly 12,000 youth who left care at age 16 or older between 1988 and 1992, an average of 300 per year—or about 12 percent—ended up in city shelters in less than three years. Of all the factors that increased a former foster youth's likelihood of becoming homeless, being a mother was far and away the most predictive: women were two and a half times more likely to end up in shelters than men, and 94 percent of them had children.

Culhane's cohort aged out in the early 1990s. In the nearly two decades that followed, the world of child welfare invested hundreds of millions of dollars to improve services for adolescents in care. Agencies got funding for education and housing specialists, whose job it was to help teens prepare for successful adulthood, and some states extended the guarantee of shelter and support to age 21.

By any logic, by the time Culhane's study was published in 2004, outcomes for youth aging out of care should already have begun to look much better. But this is where the story

takes a twist: In the fall of 2008, ACS and the Department of Homeless Services matched up their data once again, this time tracing just a two-year trajectory after young people left care. Despite more than a decade of institutional and philanthropic effort, the percentage of former foster children entering homeless shelters in New York City has gone up to about 15 percent. And once again, it was young mothers who were most likely to end up in need of shelter: Of the 225 aged-out foster youth who walked through homeless shelter doors, more than half were women with children.

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A few weeks short of her 20th birthday, Jill sits on one end of a sofa in a sunny east-Bronx living room, attempting to dissuade her 13-month-old daughter, Sarah, from taking a nosedive to the floor. A squirmy bundle of pink sneakers and ponytails, Sarah pauses to contemplate the vagaries of physics and maternal wisdom, chewing reflectively on the corner of her mother's cell phone.

Above their heads, an oversized bulletin board carries the exuberant headline: "Housing and Employment Opportunities!!!" Other than a brief list of temp agencies, it's empty—an expansive, corkboard testament to a brutal economy, a city in perpetual housing crisis and life options that have become increasingly scarce.

Jill and Sarah are two of the six current occupants of a mother-child transitional-living residence run by Inwood House, the agency that also operates the city's largest foster care program for young women with babies. The Bronx site isn't part of the foster care system: it's funded by the Department of Youth and Community Development rather than ACS, and it's intended to serve homeless and runaway girls between the ages of 16 and 21. But, like many of the city's programs for homeless youth, it often ends up housing kids who have left the child welfare system and run out of places to go.

Jill's mom abandoned her when she was a year old. She was adopted soon after by a woman who beat her and a man who she says raped her—the first time—when she was 11. She went to ACS for help when she was 15, and spent most of the following three years chasing freedom, running away from group homes and sleeping in stairwells, trains and the beds of men she called "uncles."

By the time she got pregnant, at 17, she was living with a boyfriend who, she says, "didn't kill me because he didn't want to go to jail—he loved to beat women too much." Her daughter's father was 30 years old, already living with one of the mothers of his seven other kids.

Keneca Boyce, Inwood House's director of program development, describes pregnancy as the most potentially transformative moment of many young women's lives—a juncture when girls who've lived with extreme levels of chaos can become willing to accept help and seek stability. To Jill, Sarah's imminent arrival meant there'd finally be

something in her world that lasted. “I would always worry about what would happen if people were taken away from me,” she says. “This person could move away or leave or whatever. My daughter is somebody who’s mine.”

Seeking shelter and a measure of permanence, she went back to her foster agency. But when a caseworker mentioned the possibility of reuniting with her adoptive family, she panicked. Still 17, she got a lawyer through a social service agency, emancipated herself from the system and went into a youth homeless shelter, which referred her to Inwood House. Under its contract, Inwood House was able to take her in for 18 months. Seventeen of them are over. In four weeks, she and Sarah will be back on their own.

And that’s where Jill’s story collides with New York City housing policy and a two-year-and-counting budget crisis. In her time at Inwood House, she’s earned her GED, completed two employment certification programs and applied for 15 jobs, from Toys“R”Us to high school lunch rooms. But she hasn’t been called in to interview for any of them. The chances that she’ll be ready to pay rent on an apartment in less than a month are slim.

Last year, the most likely long-term housing option for a young mom leaving a transitional residence would have been Section 8, a federally funded program that provides rental vouchers to poor families across the country. As parents and as aged-out foster youth, young women with babies had priority for these vouchers, and landlords knew they could count on subsidies that would last indefinitely.

But in December 2009, the New York City Housing Authority placed a freeze on the program, announcing that it would no longer fund new vouchers and had to revoke about 2,600 subsidies that had already been distributed. In the middle of a job-market meltdown, poor families lost a major source of housing assistance, creating a catastrophic domino effect for New Yorkers on the verge of, or trying to escape, homelessness. Pregnant and parenting foster youth were diverted to waiting lists for public housing units or supportive housing programs that were already years long. Eventually the 2,600 vouchers were restored with city funding. But for now, the program is accepting no new applications.

Without the safety net of Section 8, the best hope left for many young mothers aging out of foster care is the city’s Advantage program, a two-year rental voucher designed by the Bloomberg administration with the idea that shorter-term subsidies would motivate homeless families to become independent faster.

But the Advantage program has some major drawbacks for young, aged-out moms. First, as Roxanne Mendoza, a residence manager at Inwood House, points out, two years is not a long time to become competitive on the New York City housing market, particularly for young single mothers. Second, a voucher isn’t an apartment: In a market as tight as the city’s, landlords have little incentive to rent to young mothers with

Common Sense Help for Pregnant Teens

OVER THE PAST three years, the Administration for Children’s Services has worked with community advocates to develop a set of guidelines designed to provide as much stability as possible for young mothers and their babies in the city’s care. While no one knows exactly what works—and there has been little national or local research defining best practices—these common-sense guidelines, scheduled to go into effect by 2011, will put an end to some of the disruptions that have been a routine part of the lives of pregnant girls:

- Keep young parents in family settings whenever possible: In 2011, ACS will eliminate 100 group-home spots for pregnant and parenting girls. All foster agencies will be expected to recruit and train families who are willing to care for teenage girls, even if they become pregnant, and to allow their babies to stay with them as well.
- Blended model of congregate care: While more pregnant girls will be staying with families, some will continue to need group settings. Maternity residences, like Inwood House, are currently licensed to house pregnant girls but not babies. Under the new regulations, the young moms and their babies will be allowed to stay, giving them the chance to continue working with the same adults after they give birth.
- Community connections: Agencies are expected to help young parents connect to community resources, such as mentoring services, that specifically serve pregnant and parenting youth. Young mothers may choose to participate in foster-care-specific home-visit programs, which will pair them up with nurses who can help them develop parenting and other life skills.
- Consistent planning: ACS will provide agencies with a checklist to use at planning conferences for pregnant and parenting youth. The list covers parenting-specific issues—what can be done, for example, to support a baby’s relationship with his or her father—as well as general issues, such as education and job training, that can get lost in the chaos after a young woman becomes a parent.
- Placing mothers and babies together: When a young mother in foster care loses custody of her child, foster agencies will be strongly encouraged to consider placing the mother and child under the legal care of the same foster parents, in the same home, giving the young parent a chance to continue bonding with her child and to learn effective parenting skills. —Abigail Kramer

sparse employment records and even sparser rental histories—especially when they know their subsidies will run out two years later. Mendoza says she's seen young moms' vouchers expire before they were able to find a place to use them.

The third pitfall of the Advantage program reflects a fundamental Catch-22 of subsidized housing in New York City: It's a lot easier and faster to get if you're already homeless. Coming from a transitional housing program like Inwood House—or, for that matter, from an ACS-sponsored foster home—it can take a young mother six months to a year to get an Advantage voucher, assuming she has the organizational capacity and fortitude to show up for a series of appointments, armed with dockets of required paperwork and the ability to show that she's maintaining an income.

Coming from a shelter, the process takes weeks, not months—a disparity that creates a very real incentive for young mothers to leave foster homes or other, more stable housing programs to try their luck through the shelter system.

Once they're in shelter, they're guaranteed a roof over their heads, but they're also guaranteed yet another episode of transience—for themselves and for their children. "We look for any other option" for young mothers leaving Inwood House, says Roxanne Mendoza, "even if it means

finding a long-lost relative who's out of state."

And yet, she says, since the Section 8 freeze, about 40 percent of young moms who've left the transitional program have gone directly into homeless shelters. For now, it's the best option Mendoza sees for Jill and Sarah, since it means at least they won't be at the mercy of whoever's willing to put them up for the night. But for Jill, the promise of temporary shelter isn't enough incentive to subject herself to the authority of yet another public institution. "I heard it was disgusting," she says. "Roach infested, rat infested."

Without a better option, her plan is to move in, for at least a while, with Sarah's father, his girlfriend and their kids. "At least that's some kind of independence," she says.

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The effort to provide services to adolescents in the child welfare system is, in many ways, a project of bringing order to chaos. In a system that's predicated on disruption, occupied by children whose lives have been defined by transience, how do foster care providers give young people the stability and ongoing guidance they need to build skills, make long-term plans, and then stick with them in the face of frustration and disappointment?

Why Young Moms Leave Foster Care

SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD and four days shy of her due date, Cassandra knows what kind of parent she doesn't want to be. "My mom wasn't there for me," she says. "I won't be like that. I'm not going to hit my baby for any stupid reasons. I'm not going to give him up and then call him when he's older and then wonder why he doesn't want to talk to me."

In 15 years of foster care, Cassandra's cycled through five homes. The best one, she says, was where she met her boyfriend, the nephew of her foster mother, two placements ago. She was 15, he was 17, and she says she knew from the beginning that she'd found someone who would stick around. "We can really count on each other," she says.

They talked about having a baby someday, but decided to wait until they'd both had a chance to go to college. Then a period came late. Then another, and another, until a pregnancy test came up positive last August. "It wasn't by choice," she says, "but it kind of was, since we knew it could happen. When the doctor told me, I just couldn't stop smiling, like, 'After all those scares, I'm finally pregnant!'"

Barely five feet tall, with big, square glasses and a tiny voice, Cassandra rubs her belly as she lays out her plans for the future. She's been living at the Inwood House maternity residence, a group home for pregnant girls, for the past six months, since her last foster mother told her she'd have to move out. "She always said, 'If you get pregnant, that means you're a woman. You have to learn to do things on your own,'" says Cassandra. She should have been a senior when she got here, but she had an attendance

record full of holes, fewer than half the credits she needed to graduate and determination that, she says, "started to waver."

"We see girls come in confused or overwhelmed," says Claudette Horry, a youth development counselor at Inwood House, which operates under a contract with the Administration for Children's Services. "They might put up a wall, but if you push them, you'd be surprised—a baby can be a big motivation to do something different."

Through Inwood House, Cassandra enrolled in a joint GED and hairstyling program run by the Department of Education, where she says she hasn't missed a day in five months. Her foster mother has agreed to take her back in after the baby is born, so her planning agency will send a tutor to the house to keep her on track for her GED until she can return to the styling program, receive her certification and start looking for a job. Her baby's father is making \$14 an hour as a full-time security guard. He lives with his parents for now, but Cassandra's hoping that, if she can find work, too, they might be able to afford a one-bedroom apartment in Queens.

Ideally, she'd like to go on to college and study to be a veterinary technician. If she stayed in foster care until she turned 21, as the law provides, she would be entitled to stable housing, child care, basic supplies, an allowance for the baby, and would probably receive help paying for college as well. But nearly four years before she's due to age out, Cassandra can't wait to leave the system. "I don't want help," she says. "I'm going to be a mother. I want to do it on my own." —Abigail Kramer

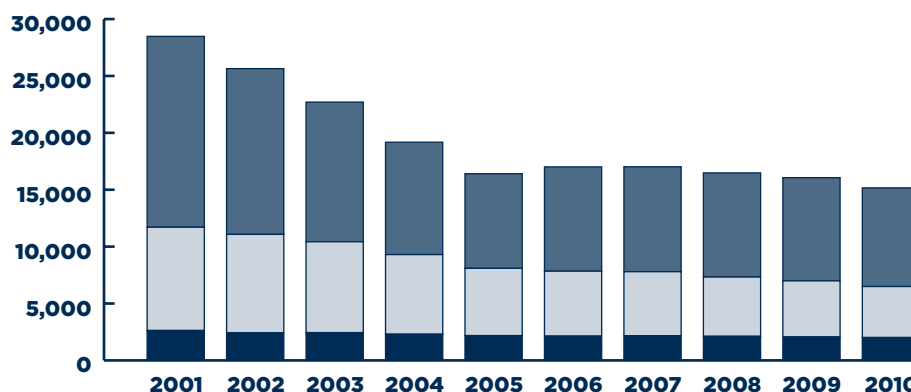
Halimah (left) wants to live with her son outside the foster care system. Chantilly (right) and her daughter became homeless after voluntarily leaving foster care.



CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS IN FOSTER CARE

While the number of children in New York City foster care has fallen, the percentage that are aged 18 and older has grown.

- Under 12 years
- 12-17 years
- 18-21 years



Sources: NYC ACS. Foster care census for the month of December, 2001–2009, and for August, 2010

Since the late 1990s, much of the federal funding for teen services has been tied to the provision of instruction in Independent Living Skills. Foster youth receive a stipend for attending group classes on topics such as résumé writing and money management

Although the federal funding for Independent Living Skills continues, the model has been largely discredited. A study at the University of Oklahoma found no correlation between instruction in Independent Living Skills and improved life outcomes. In two others studies, researchers at the University of Chicago and the Pew Charitable Trusts tracked the fates of large numbers of aged-out foster youth—with results that were overwhelmingly dismal.

Through the early 2000s, those researchers collaborated with some of the country's biggest philanthropic organiza-

tions, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation, to push child welfare agencies toward what they defined as new best practices for working with adolescents: First, get teens out of congregate care facilities and into home settings, where they have a better chance at connection and stability. When that's not possible, encourage young people to build long-term relationships with stable adults. And most importantly, involve foster youth in intensive, individualized planning for self-sufficient futures.

In 2006, ACS adopted those standards of care as the basis of its plan to overhaul services for teens in the city's foster agencies. Under its new strategy called "Preparing Youth for Adulthood," the department intended to redirect \$19 million, as well as a cadre of staff, to help agencies engage in one-on-one life planning with adolescents in their care, starting as early as a

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Leaving School Early

ALL OF THE YOUNG women interviewed for these stories have big ambitions. They want to live self-sufficient lives, with relationships that last and work that matters. Most important, they want to do what their own parents didn't: Raise and support their children through their own efforts, without depending on—or living at the mercy of—social service agencies or the state.

Decades of research suggest that young moms' best shot at achieving self-sufficiency lies in getting an education. Adults with high school diplomas and college degrees are employed significantly more often, and for significantly more money, than people without them. And so the challenge, for those who work with pregnant and parenting teens in foster care is straightforward, if far from simple: Figure out how to help young mothers stay and succeed in school.

ACS doesn't track educational achievements for young people in New York City foster care, but advocates and prac-

“The things young mothers need most, like a solid education or good vocational skills, we miss because we're so focused on questions like, ‘Did they take a parenting class?’”

tioners say the city's outcomes appear comparable to those reflected in national studies. One recent study of young people who left foster care in their late teens or early 20s in three Midwestern states, by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, is especially illuminating. Researchers found that by age 23, more than 44 percent of the young mothers and fathers in the study had never finished high school or gotten a GED; only one-fourth had a job, and three-fourths were receiving food stamps.

A study in the Northwestern United States by Casey Family Services found that, while 80 percent of 16- and 17-year-old foster youth aspired to go to college, just 10 percent of those who aged out of the system went on to enroll in a higher education program.

And according to a report by the New York City Comptroller's Office, 70 percent of New York City teenagers who become mothers drop out of school. Nationally, among young women in foster care, pregnancy and parenting doubles the risk of dropping out.

Foster youths' barriers to educational success can start early, as instability in their lives (both before and after child welfare placement) spills into the school day. Young people in foster care often bounce from school to school, losing days or weeks of in-class time as well as the benefits of educational continuity. Researchers at Chapin Hall found that by the sixth grade, students who changed schools four or more times had lost approximately one year of educational growth. A study at the University of California at Berkeley found that high school students who changed schools even once were less than half as likely to graduate, even when researchers controlled for other variables that affect high school completion.

Lost progress is hard to make up, especially when a young woman takes on the emotional and logistical challenges of raising a child. The city's Department of Education provides on-site child care at several high schools throughout the city, but there's no guarantee that a young mother will find a placement in—or near—her own school.

“A mom may have to travel across the borough to drop her child off at one site, and then leave her own school early to pick her child up at 3:00 p.m.,” says Elise Gelbman, the educational-vocational specialist at Good Shepherd Services.

Each of the city's foster agencies is required to have at least one education specialist on staff to help kids solve school-related problems, but advocates say that the quality of these services varies widely from agency to agency, and point out that many students get lost somewhere between the child welfare and public education systems. Law guardians say that truancy often goes unremarked, educational records are chronically missing and Family Court hearings and case-planning meetings are perversely scheduled during school hours.

In 2006, ACS created a dedicated education unit, which provides technical assistance to caseworkers at foster agencies, as well as direct educational advocacy for kids in the system. “Caseworkers have so many other responsibilities,” says Maya Cooper, a staff attorney at the unit. “The kids we work with have very unique needs. They need someone for whom this is their specialty.”

Attorneys at the education unit have the expertise and—for a limited number of cases—the time to assume the role that that would otherwise fall to a concerned parent: attending disciplinary hearings and planning meetings, requesting record transfers, making sure young people get specialized services like child care. For the estimated 30 to 40 percent of foster kids who are eligible for special education services, advocates can keep track of whether those services actually are delivered, and push for plans to be reevaluated when they're not working. One of the most persistent problems, says Cooper, is that young people get stuck in segregated special education classes, where they're not being challenged academically, because of unaddressed emotional problems.

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foster youth's 14th birthday. Ideally, then, young people would be armed with concrete plans for education, employment and stable housing well before they turned 18. As long as they stayed in the system through age 21, they'd have an opportunity to do a trial discharge, testing out their plans before losing the security of state-guaranteed support.

The reality has been much more complicated. Before long ACS was hit by budget cuts and laid off much of the staff of its Office of Youth Development—precisely the people who had been designated to support foster agencies in their work with adolescents. ACS says that the services for teens have not been scaled back but redistributed across the department. But advocates argue that without a central office dedicated to provide these services, foster agencies have a more difficult time planning effectively for the youth in their care, particularly because of frequent staff changes at

foster agencies. "There's a high rate of turnover, so knowledge about getting applications completed in a timely and complete manner isn't retained," says Theresa Moser, an attorney with the Juvenile Rights Project at the Legal Aid Society. "ACS can do a lot on a system level, but so much boils down to individual case workers."

Built-in disruptions are even more frequent for young women who have babies. When a girl gets pregnant, if she's already living with a foster family, the default option is supposed to be for her to stay there. In reality, however, many foster parents are reluctant or ill-equipped to provide a home for two generations of children, and very few of the city's foster agencies provide special training to encourage or support them to do so. The result is that young women are often transferred to a maternity residence—essentially, a pit stop for pregnant girls. Maternity residences aren't licensed

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"Kids in care experience some pretty significant social and environmental issues," she says. "DOE doesn't always do the best job of working on those issues, rather than looking for special ed to be the answer to all their problems."

Advocates say ACS has made a real commitment to educational services over the past several years. Through the recent rounds of budget cuts, the agency's education unit has lost just one staff person. But specialists can serve only so many kids; a great many more fall through the cracks. Regular foster care caseworkers usually don't have the expertise about education issues and systems to help with complex problems. "Turnover is consistently an issue," adds Cooper. "Once I get a caseworker to understand the spectrum of special education, they're gone."

And of course, kids in foster care are often missing another crucial element of educational attainment. In a roundup of studies, Casey Family Services reports that parental expectation is the single most important correlate of a young person's success in school, affecting everything from attendance and attitudes to graduation rates and college enrollment.

Without a consistent and invested caregiver to set standards, meet with teachers and check on a student's progress, it can become easy for young people to become subject to a culture of low expectations, as described by Benita Miller, executive director of the Brooklyn Young Mothers Collective. This is especially true for girls who have babies, Miller says.

"They get automatically put on a GED track," says Miller. "We don't value for these young women what we value for our own children." Instead, the system shifts its focus so completely onto a young woman's parenting experience and difficulties that it loses sight of everything else. "The things they need most, like a solid education or good vocational skills, we miss because we're so focused on [questions like], 'Did they take a parenting class?'" Miller says.

What does that mean for the future? "Now you're a system

person," says Miller. "You are permanently poor. We get to the point where [it's as if] the only application you're qualified to fill out is for public housing."

What are some solutions? Other than hands-on, case-by-case educational advocacy and youth programs, researchers point to a few promising possibilities:

- 1) Staying in foster care after age 18: Chapin Hall's Midwest Study found that young adults who stayed in care at age 19 were more than twice as likely as those who left care to be in school or take part in a training program. And those in the study who were from Illinois—where young people could stay in care till age 21—were four times as likely to attend college as those from Iowa and Wisconsin. In those latter states, foster care ended for most kids at age 18.
- 2) Maintaining stable relationships: A study conducted with 216 emancipated foster youth attending a four-year university found that success was associated with strong social support: nearly 87 percent had either a friend or family member to ask for help or advice if needed, 80 percent had contact with their birth family, and 60 percent still maintained relationships with their foster or kin-care parents.
- 3) Providing college prep: A 2008 five-state study of foster care youth and alumni showed that the more college preparation services they received, the greater the likelihood they had of attending post-secondary programs. With no college preparation services, 8 percent achieved a postsecondary outcome. For participants with about two years of college prep, 63 percent made it into higher education. —Abigail Kramer

Pregnancy and Parenting in Foster Care

FORTY-EIGHT PERCENT of young women in a study of teens in foster care had become pregnant by age 19. Knowledge of birth control, by itself, doesn't seem to have limited the number of pregnancies: the study, by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, found that young people in foster care were more than twice as likely to receive sex education as their peers, and about a third of the young women who became pregnant suggested they did so by choice.

"We focus a lot on the unintended pregnancies," says Dr. Lisa Handwerker, medical director at the Children's Aid Society, a foster care agency in New York City. "But we really have kids who are trying like mad to have a baby."

Some agencies make condoms available, but others have religious prohibitions against birth control.

Separated from their families and longing for connection, young women in foster care may be more likely to want to create their own families and to view having babies as a way to get love, according to Itege Bailey, senior manager of state and local outreach at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. They may even think of it as a way to break free of the foster care system and of the demands of adults in their lives.

For others, there are emotional barriers to seeking advice about family planning and sexual health. Some young women, particularly those who have been sexually abused, are reluctant to seek out STD testing or birth control because they don't trust that the services will be kept confidential—an issue that is particularly touchy for foster teens whose lives are constantly documented in case files. Attitudes on the part of health professionals matter, as well: a teen who is pregnant from forced sex might never return to a clinic if, for example, she feels misunderstood or judged by a nurse who wrongly assumes she made a decision not to use birth control.

"Many teens in foster care have histories of sexual abuse, which makes the pursuit of services that much more loaded," says Linda Lausell Bryant, executive director of Inwood House, which runs a foster care program for young mothers. "So you need folks who have sensitivity to that issue, and sensitivity to the desire that they often have to create families because they don't have one."

Most foster care agencies don't offer birth control prescriptions or other services, such as testing for STDs or HIV. Instead, they refer teens to nearby clinics, which sometimes are not attuned to serving adolescents.

"The whole thing about adolescent health care is you want to make the health care accessible," explains Handwerker of the Children's Aid Society, which has its own adolescent clinic. "It requires that your reception staff, the front-line staff, are non-judgmental and are encouraging to teens even when they do just walk in, and to applaud that they walked in, not say, 'Why are you here at a quarter to five in the afternoon?'"

Whether it is the receptionist at a clinic or a foster parent, adults who have rapport with teens are one of the most important defenses to helping teens make healthy decisions about sex, providers say.

"There's so much research that shows the relationships between a young person's health decision-making and their relationship to an adult," says Bailey, noting that one recent study found that youth in foster care who feel connected to a caregiver are more likely to use protection during sex.

"The biggest thing is if they have a rapport, that they have contact with someone that they feel comfortable talking with," agrees Gail Williams, a nurse and social worker at St. Vincent's Services' medical clinic.

Many foster parents are older, and uncomfortable or unprepared to discuss sex with the teens they care for in their homes. Young people in foster care also say that their agency social workers are uncomfortable discussing sex. Some agencies make condoms available to older teens, but others have religious prohibitions against birth control.

And when it comes to counseling on whether or not to follow through with a pregnancy, services can be hit or miss, says Lausell Bryant at Inwood House. Her organization has developed a model program for comprehensive sex education and counseling. "It goes back to the basic standards and principles of foster care," she says. "These young people have a right to know all their options. They have a right to counseling in a safe and supportive way to make the best decisions, the decision that's right for them."

Because a young person's education about sex is alternately informed and misinformed not only by educators and medical professionals, but by friends, the Internet, and family, foster care experts say every agency staff member that comes into contact with young people should receive training around sexual health. They should all be able to provide accurate, up-to-date information that will encourage young people to seek services and make thoughtful decisions.

"It's teaching not only teens about this information, but also teaching caseworkers and foster care staff," says Handwerker. "It's not just a one-time conversation, it's an ongoing conversation."

But that's only part of the solution, says Handwerker. "You have to give them something in life to feel good about. Information is not going to be enough." —Kendra Hurley

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to house babies, so new mothers must move to yet another placement after giving birth, either with a new foster family or in a mother-baby group home. “They’re already going through this incredible transition of becoming parents,” says Moser. “Then everything else changes: who they live with, where they live, who they’re working with. It’s very traumatic.”

If a young woman’s agency hasn’t successfully made a plan for where she’ll live after giving birth, new mothers can be separated from their babies as soon as they come out of the hospital, “sometimes for days; sometimes for weeks,” says Moser.

With each transition, the logistical and emotional challenges of preparing for the future become more acute. Repeated moves interrupt what may already be a struggle to stay in school and threaten whatever community connections a young mother may have—just when she’s likely to need them most. Without a long-term address, and the sense of stability that goes with it, it’s profoundly difficult to make plans and build sustainable relationships, much less apply for jobs or hunt for child care. For young people without a safety net, failure to make and execute plans can spiral into disaster, adding to the cumulative disruption that has likely characterized a young mother’s life, and which threatens to tumble down through the next generation.

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At the respective ages of 18 and 19, Halimah and Cherry are split by the particular ambivalence that defines adolescence: They want to be adults, with the control over circumstances that adulthood entails. And they want to be children, with someone to turn to when things go wrong. Because they’re in foster care, the decision they face is both literal and final. They can stay in the system until their 21st birthdays and be provided with shelter, basic necessities and—in theory at least—help with securing long-term housing before they leave. Or they can sign a piece of paper, walk out the door and be independent ... and alone.

In 10 years of foster care, Cherry, a chronic runaway, has lived in (and run away from) more than 40 placements, including three mother-baby group homes since her son, Eric, was born a year ago. Halimah’s parents left her at a youth homeless shelter when she was pregnant with her now-2-year-old boy. A few months ago, both young women ended up in a GED and career preparation program at The Door, a multiservice center for low-income youth, where they became best friends.

Of the many things they agree upon, one of the most urgent is that they want out of the system—right now. They’re tired of case workers and planning meetings, they’re tired of group-home rules and punishments, and they’re tired of living under the care of people who, as Cherry puts it, “see you as a paycheck.”

They’re equally clear on where they imagine themselves 10 years into the future: Cherry wants to be starring in movies or walking down runways; Halimah wants to be a pediatrician. It’s what comes in between that’s a little fuzzy.

Even with the best advanced planning, for most young mothers aging out of the system, survival depends on the ability to navigate a labyrinth of public systems and manage countless slippery details and moving parts. To get assisted housing, they need to maintain an income. Public assistance may hold them over for a while, but it won’t be long before they need a job—which means they have to get child care. They’re eligible for childcare vouchers from the city, but spots are hard to find and far from ideal.

Add those challenges to the daily grind of low-income single parenting: stretching a budget to cover food, diapers and baby clothes that get grown out of as soon as they’re bought; sleepless nights, sick kids, laundry, dishes, shopping, cooking, and on and on.

“I’m a single mother living in New York as an adult, and I get totally overwhelmed,” says Oma Holloway, the director of career services at The Door. “I just can’t imagine how alone you feel when you’re 16, 17, 18 and you have nobody.”

Like many providers who work with foster youth on the cusp of aging out, Holloway often finds herself trying to convince young moms to stay in the system just a little longer—to get just a bit more stability before they leave the safety of state care. It’s an argument that can be hard to sell to young women who’ve spent their lives worrying about how to survive the next day, not the next year or decade. “They have grandiose dreams of what their apartments and jobs will look like when they’re on their own,” she says. “They’re at a stage of development where it’s a real challenge to convince them, a year or two years before the time comes, that you have to map this stuff out now: child care, a job, a housing plan.”

For Cherry and Halimah, the decision to stay or go is fraught with anxiety—made more intense by the fact that they both know, intimately, what happens when a mother can’t provide a safe and stable home for her child. “I heard too many stories,” says Halimah, “where girls lost their apartment and then they lost their kids.”

And that, of course, is the monster under the bed, for young mothers in foster care and for the providers who work with them: With each layer of instability, each life plan that falls apart, the odds increase that another generation will cycle through the system.

“Some young women do make it,” says Holloway. “They’re really driven, and they’re able to do what they need to do, get help with their kids, go to college. Those that have strong people working with them and those that have the natural ability to rise above—those are the ones that make it. Does everybody have that?” ❖

Looking for Work

For former foster children, the recession hits hard.

BY ABIGAIL KRAMER

JONATHAN MERCADO made his plan when he was 11, the third time he'd been taken from his mother and the first time he realized she wasn't going to stop using drugs: As soon as he was old enough to get out of foster care, he'd find a job, get an apartment and take in his six little brothers and sisters. "That way everything would go back to normal," he says. "I would fix this and I would take care of them."

Seven years, 10 schools and at least eight foster homes later, the state of New York declared Mercado an adult. He left state care when the economy was on the brink of recession. "When it came to it," he says, "I didn't even know how I was going to take care of myself."

At the best of times, aging out of the child welfare system can be like walking off a plank. Somewhere between their 18th and 21st birthdays, former foster kids lose or relinquish their rights to state-sponsored food, clothing and shelter and head out into the world on their own. The hope is that they've been equipped with the skills and connections they'll need to stay afloat. The reality is that a huge number sink: Nationally, four years after leaving care, one-quarter of former foster kids have been homeless, just 46 percent have graduated from high school and fewer than 20 percent are self-supporting, according to 2007 data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Over the past two years, the prospects have only gotten starker. When the job market came crashing down, young people found themselves at the bottom, with employment rates plummeting by nearly 25 percent for teenagers, and nearly 11 percent among 20- to 24-year-olds. Those with the least education got hit the hardest: Between 2007 and 2009, people without a high school diploma lost jobs at nearly twice the rate of high school graduates and more than 10 times the rate of those who had finished college, according to a 2009 report by the Community Service Society.

"We used to expect young people to go on four or five interviews to get a job," says Courtney Hawkins, an associate vice president at FECS, a not-for-profit organization which runs the Bronx-based Academy, an intensive, one-on-one education and career support program for youth aging out of foster care. "Now it's more like 10 or 12."

Jonathan Mercado ended up at The Academy after getting laid off from a night job stocking shelves at Toys "R" Us. He was 20 years old, had a GED, some college credits and a history of work experience—more than many young adults who come out of the system. But he'd filled out a month's worth of job applications without hearing anything back, and he was on the verge of losing his apartment. "I guess I would have gone into a shelter," he says. The Academy placed him in a paid internship until he found steady work as a teller at Chase Bank.

"The jobs do still exist," says Denise Hinds, the assistant executive director for residential programs at Good Shepherd Services, which houses 40 former foster kids. "They're just harder to find, and it takes a lot of work to get our young people into them. We give around-the-clock support."

But intensive services take time and money, which are in increasingly short supply. Even before the recession began, young adults fell into a sort of services black hole. "They're not really adults yet, but they're not children. From a funding point of view, nobody owns them," says Michael Zisser, the CEO of The Door, a nonprofit agency that provides career and education services to low-income youth.

The result, say advocates, is that there are not nearly enough programs for high-need, low-skilled youth—the cohort into which former foster kids are likely to fall. The city estimates that 160,000 youths between the ages of 16 and 21 are neither in school nor working in a legal job, yet the Community Service Society reports that there are only 12,000 program spots aimed at helping young adults get back into school or the work force.

Where programs do exist, advocates say, the mechanics of their funding make it nearly impossible to serve the young people with the highest needs. Nearly all of the city's youth workforce money comes through the Office of Youth and Community Development, which attaches stringent time limits and performance requirements to its service contracts. If providers can't prove that they're turning clients into earners quickly, they don't get paid. That model "is just not realistic for this population," says Zisser. "If someone comes who's 19 and has a fourth-grade reading level, you shouldn't expect that in three months they're going to get an apartment and a stable job and be making \$20 an hour."

In the past, ACS employed specialists who helped teens get into the work force, but budget cuts have forced the agency to lay off or redeploy much of the staff it hired to assist foster agencies in preparing adolescents for independent adulthood. "It makes things a lot harder," says Jarel Melendez, a youth advocate at Lawyers for Children, which represents foster kids as they age out of the system. "There used to be a centralized place that could fill in the gaps; now it's haphazard. You have a caseworker, but they've got 25 or 30 clients. They may be good and have the knowledge to help you; they may not." ❖

Learning to Be a Mom

Nurses help new mothers bond with their babies.

BY ABIGAIL KRAMER

ROSETTA SAVANA was 17 years old and living in her 19th foster home when she found out she was pregnant. She'd already had two miscarriages, so she was thrilled when her first ultrasound indicated that her baby was doing well. But then she ran into a series of health problems of her own: her lifelong asthma flared up, complicated by gestational diabetes that wouldn't come under control even with three insulin shots a day. Her blood pressure skyrocketed, leading to black-outs and debilitating headaches. By her third trimester, she had been rushed to the hospital by ambulance a number of times, only to be sent home. "Every day or two, I was in the hospital, but I guess they didn't get it that there's really something wrong," she recalls.

That's when Joanne Schmidt entered—and quite possibly saved—Savana's life. Schmidt is a nurse with the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP), a home-visiting program for low-income, first-time mothers, administered by the city's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Nurses in the program have small caseloads and follow clients from pregnancy through their babies' second birthdays, meeting regularly to talk about everything from safe sex to teething to job applications. Three years ago, NFP partnered with the Administration for Children's Services, launching an initiative that has now paired nurses with about 125 young mothers in foster care.

Schmidt says health care providers underestimated the seriousness of Savana's condition. She insisted that the hospital admit Savana in her seventh month of pregnancy—rather than send her home as it had previously. Doctors induced labor and performed an emergency C-section. Five months later, Savana's son, Tristan, is a healthy, wide-eyed baby with chubby legs and a big, drooling grin. For her part, Savana graduated from high school after Tristan was born and now plans to attend nursing school, paid for by her foster care agency, Children's Village.

The NFP program serves 2,300 New York City families and has an annual budget of \$19.5 million from various sources, including Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Robin Hood Foundation. NFP has yet to generate evaluation data from its services for young moms in foster care, but the program has demonstrat-

ed impressive outcomes in its work with other populations of low-income mothers. Over three national studies, the NFP model has shown a steep reduction in rates of child abuse, increased cognitive function and school readiness among children, fewer unintended subsequent pregnancies and significantly increased workforce participation among mothers.

The program helps new mothers develop healthy bonds with their kids. "The nurses encourage moms to anticipate their babies' births and engage in excitement about that," says Lisa Landau, NFP's New York City director. "Once the child is born, it's talking about the importance of interacting, reading, being on the floor with your child. For some women that's very natural; for some it's not something they might know in their own families."

The program is limited to first-time mothers. It usually enrolls young women who seek support early in their pregnancy, so there's time to create a strong relationship with the nurse before the baby is born. These rules, and limited funding, mean only a fraction of young mothers in foster care can take part. But for those who can, advocates say the program provides something foster youth often lack: someone who's paying consistent attention. "Pregnant teens in foster care face a lot of instability," says Mariam Sammons, director of the Mother/Child Program at the foster agency New York Foundling. "Having continuity is so important, not just to focus on the parenting piece but also on the mom and her own needs."

The program is both confidential and voluntary—and that may be why it works.

"Adolescents in foster care have a lot of people telling them what to do," says Tonya Pearson, an NFP nurse for the past four years. "Our program is very client directed—anything they don't want to talk about is off-limits." Nurses help clients identify their own goals and how to achieve them. "It's not about what we think is best for the young woman," says Pearson. "It's about what they see for themselves. Then you celebrate each small success."

Veronica Arias was 18 years old and going into her second year in a Supervised Independent Living Program when she found out she was pregnant. Terrified that ACS would take her baby from her, she hid the pregnancy until she started to show, and then she went AWOL from her foster care agency for a month. "I was lost," she says. "I was worried about if I'd be able to do it right—I've been in care all my life. I didn't know how to raise a baby."

Arias' caseworker referred her to NFP, which connected her to Pearson. "I get nervous talking to people about my business," says Arias, "but she had this aura. I trusted her." They talked about what parenting would be like, and Pearson gave her strategies to bond with her baby while she was still pregnant. "I used to sing to her and talk to her," says Arias. "It made no sense to me, but then she was born and she opened her eyes when she heard my voice. She knew who her mommy was." ❀

ACS Dismantles Transitional Housing

A key program for young adults will close by the end of the year.

BY KENDRA HURLEY

THE ADMINISTRATION FOR Children's Services is dismantling its program that gives 125 foster teens on the brink of aging out the chance to practice living on their own while still having the support of the foster care system. For more than 10 years, the soon-to-be-defunct Supervised Independent Living Program (SILP) has provided foster teens aged 18 to 20 what many experts say is essential to any housing program helping young people transition to independence—a chance to try out living on their own, with a safety net to catch them if they get into trouble.

"I thought this was kind of going to be the future for older adolescents in child welfare," says Green Chimneys Executive Director Joseph Whalen, who had hoped to open 20 more SILP apartments. "I was wrong."

In an emailed statement to *Child Welfare Watch*, the ACS press office said ACS's decision to close the SILP apartments stemmed from its philosophy that young people in foster care are best served living with families. "It can be difficult to transition to independence as an adult, and we believe that a youth should have a family to support him or her throughout each of their lives," the press office wrote.

Providers speculate a tough year for the budget, confusion about whom to place in SILP apartments, and ACS's perception that SILP became what one executive director described as "a dumping ground" for young people who did not make it in a family setting contributed to the decision. SILPs cost around \$100 a day, says Douglas O'Dell of SCO Family of Services, a foster care agency with more than 500 teens preparing to age out. For the fiscal year ending July 1, 2010, the SILP program cost \$4,422,317, with the city paying \$1,459,365, or 33 percent, the state paying 41 percent, and the federal government 26 percent.

The SILP program is ending just as other housing resources are vanishing. The federal government has cut off Section 8 vouchers, and they have become more difficult for young people leaving care to secure.

While many providers praise the SILP program as the best option for vulnerable teens, others fault it for giving young people too much independence and too little supervision. Many agencies minimized this risk by filling SILP apartments with their most mature young people—those who could be trusted to live well on their own. But some providers say that as the number of teens in foster care dramatically shrank over the last decade, a higher percentage of the teens left in the system struggle with histories of serious trauma. "Simply stated, seriously troubled kids and indirect supervision are not compatible," Poul Jensen, president and CEO of Graham Windham, wrote in an email.

Others defend SILP. "It provided them with an opportunity to try out their wings and assume adult responsibility, while still offering a safety net," explains Sister Paulette Lo-Monaco, executive director of Good Shepherd Services.

The 125 young people living in SILP apartments budget their own money, shop for groceries, cook their own meals, clean their own apartments, and learn to get along with neighbors and roommates, all while receiving instruction and oversight from caseworkers, who lead workshops on independent living skills and visit them in their apartments regularly. If the teens get into trouble—say, a landlord complains they are playing music too loud and too late at night—instead of facing eviction, they can move back to a more structured setting in the foster care system, until they are ready to try living on their own again.

In March, ACS informed Good Shepherd Services and other foster care agencies operating SILP apartments that all SILP apartments would be closed by the end of the year. The young people who were living in them at the time of ACS's announcement would either be discharged from foster care or moved to other foster care placements, preferably with families.

Foster care providers and advocates say they are skeptical that they will find families for the majority of the young people in SILPs. Moreover, they say SILP apartments prepare young people to live on their own in an experiential, hands-on way that cannot be matched in any other living situation.

"There are definitely better-than-adequate foster families, but I don't know if you get the same kind of curriculum built in the way it's built in SILP," says Theresa Nolan, director of New York City programs for Green Chimneys, which runs 15 SILP apartments. Nolan believes that the young people aging out from SILP apartments leave foster care more prepared to live on their own than youth in other foster placements. "They actually are sometimes better equipped than youth who do grow up in families, simply because so much attention is paid to the life-skills curriculum in SILP," she adds.

O'Dell, who is assistant executive director of SCO, says that 22 of the 23 young adults who aged out of SCO's SILP

“It provided them with an opportunity to try out their wings and assume adult responsibility, while still offering a safety net,” explains Sister Paulette LoMonaco

apartments over a recent 12-month period left with both income and housing in place. “SILP to me was the best preparation for a young person aging out,” says O’Dell.

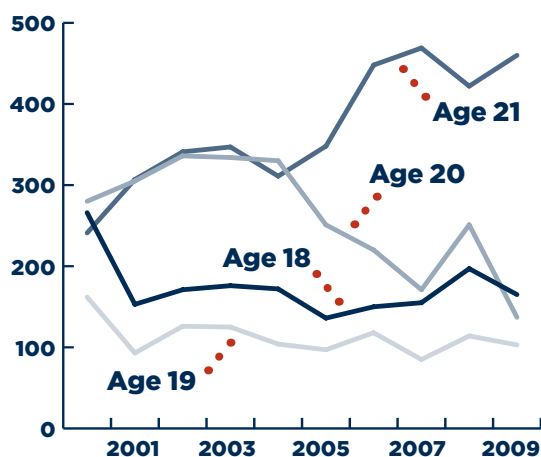
Some providers say young people who are most likely to struggle after leaving care are the ones who most need the experience of living on their own while they still have caseworkers to support them. “Some of the worst kids I had, I put them in there to give them a reality check,” says Whalen of Green Chimneys. “We understood it as, ‘Hey listen, here’s an opportunity for kids. We can transition them to independence and keep an eye on them. A lot of them are going to fail, and this is a learning experience,’” says Whalen, adding that when a young person did fail, he simply moved them to a group living situation until they were ready to try again. “These are the kind of things that are powerful teaching moments for kids,” he says.

Priti Kitaria, who represents teens in foster care at Lawyers for Children, agrees. “It’s the best model for youth aging out of care,” she says. “Ideally, that’s where most of my clients would go.”

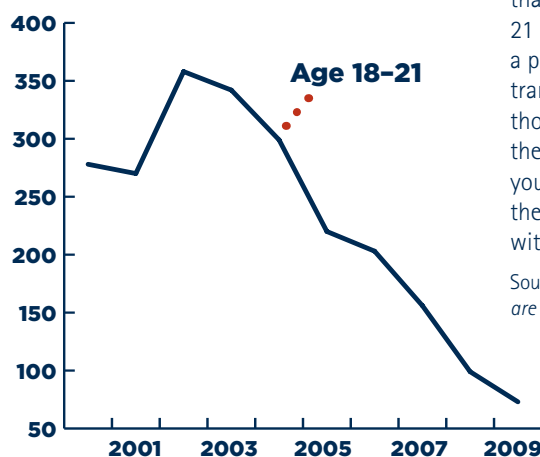
Velma Frezzell, 21, lived in numerous foster homes as a teen, but says none prepared her for independence the way her year spent in a SILP apartment did. In SILP, says Frezzell, she learned countless things that she believes can only be learned through living them, like the week she and her roommate spent trying in vain to fix a flooded toilet before their social worker explained they needed to call their super. “I thought I was independent, but it showed me independence in a different way,” says Frezzell. “You’re on your own, you don’t have a parent or authority figure telling you what to do, but if you don’t do what you need to do, you’re going to be living in a bad environment, and no one wants to live that way.”

Frezzell now lives in public housing, attends John Jay College full-time and, until just a few days before speaking with *Child Welfare Watch*, held a steady job as a department-store sales associate. She says her experience in a SILP made her transition out of foster care almost seamless. “I was ready to move out before I was finally discharged,” she says. “I don’t think I’d be where I am now if I wasn’t in it.” ✕

YOUNG ADULTS AGING OUT INTO A PLANNED LIVING ARRANGEMENT



YOUNG ADULTS GOING AWOL OR DESTINATION UNKNOWN



A growing number of young people are remaining in foster care until age 21. Studies show that those who leave at 21 are more likely to have a plan for housing and transitional supports than those who leave earlier. At the same time, far fewer young adults are leaving the foster care system without any planning at all.

Source: NYCACS. Discharge data are for calendar years

Young people aged 18 to 25 are neither adolescents nor adults, but in a distinct time of transition. If they receive the right supports and services during this critical juncture, the hope is that they can avoid homelessness and reliance on public assistance for the long haul.

Christopher Guzman is among the first wave of residents to live in New York/New York III apartments slated for young adults in transition.



A Home for Five More Years

Creating a solution to homelessness for young men and women.

BY KENDRA HURLEY

AT 22, Christopher Guzman would like to consider himself an adult. But life in the new, brick Bronx building known as Louis Nine, where he lives, reminds Guzman of his teen years spent in too many group homes. “It’s just the atmosphere, it’s just the rules and regulations of certain things that brings it back up like you was in a group home,” says Guzman, an amiable young man with an abundance of nervous energy.

There’s the fact that visitors must sign in with a security guard and be gone by 11 p.m. on weeknights, 1 a.m. on weekends. There are the caseworkers with whom Guzman must meet regularly and the monthly room inspections to assess his housekeeping. There’s the pot smoking, the drinking, and the bickering among the other residents. And then there’s the stealing. “Some people will leave their door open, and that’s it—they’re f--ked after that,” he says. “It’s still a group-home atmosphere,” he shrugs.

In fact, Louis Nine is trying desperately to distinguish itself from the group homes and other institutions its residents have recently left behind. That’s been one of the program’s biggest challenges, says James McFarlane, program director for the Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter, which runs the residence. Louis Nine is a housing program for 46 rent-paying young men and women aged 18 to 25 who have spent time in institutions, including foster care group homes, mental health residential treatment facilities, juvenile correctional centers and homeless shelters.

Historically, there have been two social service systems: one for children and another for adults. Louis Nine is part of an emerging trend to tailor supports and services for a third group—18- to 25-year-olds. The idea is that young people of this age group are neither adolescents nor adults, but in a distinct time of transition. If they receive the right supports and services during this critical juncture, the hope is that they can avoid homelessness and reliance on public assistance for the long haul. “There’s still the presumption that if you give them the support they need, they will become independent,” explains Michael Zisser, CEO of The Door, a nonprofit social service and legal support organization.

Louis Nine’s specific goal is to help young adults who have spent part or all of their adolescence in institutions become ready to live independently. Young people leaving foster care and other institutions often have a difficult time making it on their own. Many spend time homeless or incarcerated. One national study in the 1990s by Westat, a social services research group, found that four years after leaving foster care, a quarter had spent at least one night homeless, and fewer than half were employed.

Over the last decade, government officials and philanthropists across the country have searched for ways to change this, providing housing vouchers, extending the age young people can remain in foster care from 18 to 21, setting up new transitional support programs for older youth in care, and offering education grants. Yet rates of homelessness among youth who have been institutionalized have been stubbornly high. In the Midwest, a 2010 study by the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center found that by age 23 or 24, almost 40 percent of the 723 former foster youth followed by researchers had spent at least one night homeless or had couch surfed between the homes of friends, family and strangers. In New York today, officials say they continue to see hundreds of young people becoming homeless after leaving foster care.

These 200 beds serve one of the toughest populations ever to be served in supportive housing: institutionalized young adults who have never lived on their own before.

The Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter is one of eight nonprofit organizations that have established a pioneering New York City housing initiative to reduce rates of homelessness among young men and women by working with young people before they have nowhere to go. Four hundred young people aging out of institutions or living in homeless shelters are getting a place to live for a few years while they receive intensive, hands-on experience mastering the skills of day-to-day adult living. These are skills many of us take for granted: grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, paying bills and holding down a job.

But there's no guarantee that simply providing more services and supports to young adults actually helps them succeed. And the catch at housing programs like Louis Nine: It's up to the young adults—many of whom are eager to break

free of programs and authority—to decide whether or not to take part in trainings and social services. By contract, government deems these services to be voluntary, and organizations are loathe to evict young people who don't join in. Many of the programs are struggling to find new ways to engage residents and make these extra years of support worthwhile.

"It's been extremely challenging, says McFarlane. "They can't live here forever, and if we don't prepare them for the real world now, we're going to be doing them a disservice."

This is a fledgling experiment, to be sure. All but one of the city's supportive housing programs for young people are less than 10 years old and the vast majority are less than three. Their premise of providing housing and help to troubled young adults before they spend months and years in city homeless shelters or hustling on the streets might sound commonsensical. But it has never before been tried with more than a few dozen young people at a time. The creators have an unprecedented opportunity to point out valuable new strategies for helping young people with special needs transition to adulthood and independence. Whether or not they succeed depends largely on whether or not they are able to connect with young adults who have no place else to go, young people who would otherwise have become homeless, in and out of institutions and trouble.

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Only in the last decade did programs like Louis Nine begin to crop up in New York City and around the country. The first ones took only a handful of young adults, and they often selected residents who were highly motivated and likely to succeed, such as young men and women in college or already working.

For many young people who weren't ready or able to live on their own, one alternative was the adult supportive housing programs that sprouted across the city during the 1990s, thanks to the state's long-overdue reinvestment of funds saved through the widespread deinstitutionalization of mentally ill men and women starting in the 1970s. But to move into these programs, a man or woman had to have spent substantial time in a homeless shelter or suffered for years with chronic mental illness. Young adults aging out of children's systems rarely fit these criteria, and when they did, it was almost impossible to find a program that would accommodate the proclivities of young adults who, almost by definition, resist rules, authority and programs.

"The data say that individuals with [mental] health problems at the age of 17 or 16 on, until about 25 years of age, are trying to get out of programs and get people out of their life," explains Hewitt B. "Rusty" Clark, director of the National Network on Youth Transition for Behavioral Health and a professor at the University of South Florida. "But most of our adult systems are designed around how many individuals they are going to be serving. When someone isn't stepping up to the plate and doing exactly what's asked of them, they aren't going to be serving them."

Miguel Ayala knows all too well. Articulate, bright, and haunted by his past, Ayala was a writer at *Represent*, the magazine written by and for teens in foster care that I once edited. Often within mere minutes of meeting a well-intentioned adult, Ayala lay bare the Dickensian details of his childhood—his mother's abandoning him; the abuse he endured in a relative's home; the bullying at his group home for foster teens with mental illness.

People responded to him, and Ayala had formed an extensive network of concerned adults. A growing body of research shows that foster teens with this kind of support system are far more likely to succeed during those tenuous years after care than those without adults to depend on. Ayala had caring adults in spades.

Because he had a serious mental illness—bipolar disorder—he also qualified for supportive housing when he left foster care. Many of us who knew him assumed that unlike other young adults who flounder trying to figure out where to live and how to scrape by after care, Ayala was set.

And yet, shortly after Ayala turned 21—the year young people age out of foster care—he became homeless. He remained homeless, on and off, for more than a year, bouncing between the infamous Bellevue shelter for mentally ill men, psychiatric hospitals, and the homes of friends or girlfriends whom he usually met at programs for the mentally ill. During that time, numerous caseworkers tried to find Ayala a housing program, but they could not find one willing to take him in. Part of the problem was his young age. In 2000, not one of the nearly 10,000 beds for adults with mental illness in the city's adult residential system was dedicated to serving young adults. The average age of the residents was 45.

Some of the programs Ayala interviewed with were clearly designed for residents who would need supportive housing their entire lives. Many of the residents were coming out of long-term hospitalization and appeared sedated, sitting in the common room staring blankly ahead. Visiting these programs upset Ayala, who loved to socialize. He said it made him fear for his future.

At the time, the city's earliest supportive housing programs for young adults leaving foster care were just opening, including Schafer Hall in East Harlem and the Chelsea Foyer on Manhattan's west side. But together they housed fewer than 70 young adults. Ayala applied to the Foyer. Housed in an old YMCA building, it was modeled to feel like a college dorm, with small apartments and common areas where the residents could hang out together. The place had felt good to him, like somewhere he'd want to call home. But the majority of young adults it took were higher functioning than he was, and had often already held jobs. Ayala was rejected.

With each new rejection, Ayala became increasingly depressed and despondent. He began taking his psychiatric medications erratically and sometimes not at all, often opting, instead, for marijuana. He developed a favorite hospi-

tal—St. Vincent's—where he went whenever he felt suicidal, or actually attempted to overdose, usually from Tylenol PM. The food there was good, he said, the staff was nice, and it was often a welcome break from the shelters.

Eventually Ayala landed a room in one of the coveted residences run by Fountain House, a clubhouse for mentally ill adults in a brownstone on the Upper West Side. But as with most housing programs, the rest of the residents were older than Ayala, and the house rules reflected this.

Successful housing programs for people of Ayala's age allow young adults to learn through trial and error, says Clark. The idea for the practitioners running these programs is to find a balance “between two axioms”—maximizing the likelihood that transitioning young adults will develop confidence in their own skills, while allowing them to still make mistakes and experience real-life consequences when they mess up. To do this, says Clark, a mistake comes with consequences—but not outright rejection and a return to homelessness.

But at Fountain House, Ayala found that the rules were strict, and that violent behavior, drug use or nonpayment of rent could send him back to the streets. Ayala panicked—a reaction Clark says is standard behavior for young adults in housing programs, who almost instinctively test limits.

In only two weeks, Ayala was hospitalized three times for overdosing on over-the-counter medication, and he returned to the shelter system. Only this time, the city required that he go to a shelter for men with substance-abuse issues. And in a curious twist, addiction became Ayala's ticket to a somewhat more stable life. He now qualified for adult housing for people with mental illness and addiction—and his diagnosis finally matched available housing. He moved into a home for men coming straight from shelters that had virtually no therapeutic or rehabilitative element to it. Ayala has lived in housing programs for most of the last five years and continues to struggle with addiction to this day.

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Only very recently did the housing landscape begin to look more promising for young adults like Ayala. In 2005, the city and state create the unprecedented, if awkwardly named, New York/New York III Initiative, which Louis Nine is part of. This was the third phase of supported housing investment from the state and local government, and the first to include a large component targeted for young adults. New York/New York III provides streamlined funding to house and support 400 young adults. About half of the programs that will be funded this way began operating in the last two years, and they are mostly intended for young adults who have recently been in foster care, some already with histories of homelessness. The remainder, slated primarily for young men and women leaving mental health facilities, have not yet been assigned to the nonprofits who will develop them.

To get an apartment through the program, a young person is supposed to be working or in school and have some sort of income—if not through work then through SSI disability payments or public assistance. Once accepted, residents are supposed to pay 30 percent of their income in rent, and the program covers the rest, including services like career counseling, case management, and help learning how to live independently.

Some of the programs are in apartments scattered throughout Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx. Landlords rent these apartments to social services agencies, whose caseworkers assign them to young adults leaving care. They check on their clients regularly and offer them services at their agencies. Others are like Louis Nine, based in their own buildings with common areas and caseworkers on-site.

Together, these 200 beds serve one of the toughest populations ever to be served in supportive housing: institutionalized young adults who have never lived on their own before.

“These are young people who have been traumatized, abandoned, rejected, told they wouldn’t amount to anything,” says McFarlane. “You’re dealing not with the individual. You’re dealing with their whole history.”

Coming from group homes and other institutions, many of the young men and women in New York/New York III apartments are used to having the minutiae of their lives managed for them. Some have never cooked a meal or done their own laundry, and never learned to take medication or make a doctor’s appointment on their own. A large number struggle with health issues as well as mental health issues. Pretty much all of them have experienced the trauma of being removed from their families, living in extreme poverty or suffering from abuse and neglect. They desperately need not only a place to live but help getting on their feet.

“They just need so much more support,” says Denise Hinds, assistant executive director for residential programs at the Chelsea Foyer, run by Good Shepherd Services. Although the Foyer was established in 2003, the program began working with young people from the New York/New York III program two years ago. She says the current group of young people has challenges she didn’t see as frequently during the Foyer’s earlier years. “There are more with mental health issues, more with substance-abuse issues, anger management, you name it. Talking to a young person who is struggling in those ways about having a job, you almost have to talk pre-job about some of those things because they’re not going to stay in the job. We have to do a lot more hand-holding.”

At the same time, having had their fill of caseworkers and programs, many young people in New York/New York III housing are eager to be free. This leaves providers in a difficult position. They struggle to find the balance between too much structure and too little, between serving as landlords who want rent paid on time and counselors eager to give residents the benefit of the doubt and chances to learn from mistakes. Too

little guidance, and residents fritter away their days, missing opportunities. Too much hand-holding, and residents view the program as an extension of group-home life—just another program with rules and regulations to resist.

Christopher Guzman is a fairly typical resident. He spent much of his youth in group homes and other foster care institutions, takes psychiatric medication and, before he heard about New York/New York III, was certain he was on the fast track to homelessness.

A little over a year ago, at 20 years old and about to age out of care, he had no job and no prospects for one. Because much of his schooling had taken place on campuses for foster kids instead of a regular high school, Guzman had a diploma designed for special education students—one rarely recognized by employers. His mother died when he was 6, and he had no idea where or with whom he could live after leaving foster care.

When his second-to-last group home closed, his foster care agency tried to find new homes with relatives or foster families for everyone living there. They could not find a family for Guzman, only underscoring for him how truly on his own he would be.

“They want us to move in with families,” he’d said angrily. “With what families? We’re in this predicament because of f--ing families!”

Guzman was about to become a father. He was excited about the baby but had no idea how he would support himself, much less a child. “I was headed for a shelter,” he remembers.

At the peak of Guzman’s desperation, a friend of his from another group home was placed in New York/New York III housing. “He said, ‘Yo, I’m going in there, you should go in there with me,’” Guzman remembers. Guzman’s caseworker sent in an application, and soon he was interviewing at Louis Nine. He liked it, especially since he knew a few of the people who lived there from other group homes he’d been in. Also, Guzman’s girlfriend lived in the Bronx, and he felt it was especially important to be close to her and their baby. He also really liked that the laundry machines in Louis Nine’s basement were free.

So in the spring of 2009, Guzman went on public assistance, signed the lease for his Louis Nine studio that would be renewable for up to five years, and moved his belongings into a small, freshly painted apartment on the building’s second floor.

For a while, Guzman felt relief that he had a place to live, and he liked having his own apartment. He worked cleaning schools in a summer job program for youth and paid rent more or less on time. But then, as happens to so many young people a few months after first leaving care, things started going very wrong.

Guzman’s girlfriend had wanted him to find an apartment where they could live with their daughter as a family. Frustrated, she broke up with him and moved with their daughter to Virginia. As Guzman waited for a judge to tell

Providers struggle to find the balance between too much structure and too little, between serving as landlords who want rent paid on time and counselors eager to give residents the benefit of the doubt and chances to learn from mistakes.

him whether he could have a role in his newborn daughter's life, he spiraled into a depression. After his summer job ended, he sold water at Giants stadium for a while, but eventually quit and began paying rent erratically.

In a matter of months, a dispute about a woman turned Guzman's best friend in the building into his worst enemy, along with his friend's friends. Guzman stopped feeling safe at home. "There's going to be a time when something is said or happens when we have an altercation and throw blows, because we see each other every day," he said, about his former friends.

Eventually, Guzman's ex-girlfriend moved back to New York with their daughter. Now Guzman can see his daughter only three days a month by court order, he says, and he gives her mother whatever he can afford in child support, often just \$5 here or there. He recently enrolled in a job training program at Bellevue hospital to become a janitor, though he admits that his attendance is spotty.

Up to now, Louis Nine staff has mostly overlooked Guzman's missed rent payments, largely because he is one of the building's handful of residents who enthusiastically attends the building meetings and workshops on topics like job interviewing and anger management. Guzman is agreeable and they can tell he's trying. He says he's grateful this seems to be enough to buy him a little more time, which, just now, is what he feels he needs most.

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Rusty Clark first started imagining a new way of working with young adults like Guzman in the early 1990s, when he was conducting a study of children in the foster care system with

emotional and behavioral issues at the University of South Florida and found that these young people moved homes an average of four times a year. He wanted to know how to help young people like them transition to adulthood. At the time, there was little research that defined exactly how to nudge young people with behavioral and emotional issues toward self-sufficient adulthood, and he figured the best he could do was learn from others pursuing innovative strategies.

Clark traveled to Minnesota, which at the time led the nation in helping people with disabilities transition to adulthood. While the state had many programs that worked well with people who had mental retardation or physical disabilities, Clark found that they often screened out those young adults with diagnoses of bipolar disorder or schizophrenia.

"These are the throwaway kids," says Clark. "Huge portions of these individuals end up in juvenile justice facilities, and it became very clear that something needed to be done."

Clark and his colleagues scoured the research but found no effective programs to help people who had emotional difficulties become self-sufficient adults. "People just didn't know what to do with youth and young adults with mental health challenges in this transition population," Clark remembers.

He and his team at the University of South Florida and at the National Network on Youth Transition for Behavioral Health established the Transition to Independence Process (TIP), which starts from the premise that it is not up to the young adults themselves to be motivated. Rather, it is a program's responsibility to find ways to engage them. This requires patient, flexible staff members, as well as a wide array of services and supports for employment, education,

housing, and mental health. That way, if one service isn't working for a young person, there are others to try, and staff willing to try them.

In the years since, programs in more than 20 states have adopted the TIP model, and several studies have found it to have significantly improved outcomes for young people with emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Clark tells the story of one 19-year-old woman with severe bipolar disorder to explain how the TIP-program works. Stabilized on medication, she moved into her own apartment near the community college she was attending, with plans for a caseworker to check in on her regularly. Two weeks later, says Clark, her world was crumbling. "We found her off her meds, in a state of depression and not maintaining her activities and engagement with the community college," Clark remembers.

Instead of panicking and deciding the young woman was not ready or able to live on her own, the multidisciplinary TIP team set her up in an apartment shared with another young woman from the program, each with their own bedrooms. A mentor from the college lives nearby and checks in frequently. So far the new arrangement has worked well.

"You need to think smart about what an individual would like to do, and what you need to do to tailor your supports to make sure it's successful," explains Clark, who authored the handbook *Transition of Youth & Young Adults With Emotional Behavior Difficulties*. "These aren't easy things to pull off."

Such programs not only need ample resources but also staff who know when to go back to the drawing board when a plan isn't working and when to allow young people to progress at their own, often idiosyncratic pace. Some young people will hop from job to job. Others will experiment with drugs. These are normal behaviors among young adults.

It's also normal for a young person to resist therapy and other services, Clark says. "As a psychologist, I may feel confident that this young lady needs services for trauma. But she is so system savvy, and so wary of all the imposed services that have been pushed on her, that I understand she's not ready for this type of intervention, so there's no reason to go there."

A more effective method, says Clark, is to first build trust by helping her work toward her own goals, and through that work she may begin to see that her counselors have her best interests in mind. Then, she might consider therapy.

"We want to help her come over time to understand for herself how it could be possibly beneficial to her to address these previous traumas," says Clark. "That might not be until after her third boyfriend, where he's been abusive or not really there for her, where she finally wants to learn something about how to choose a friend or develop a relationship that has features that would really be there for her."

The key is collaborative planning and not expecting

young people to immediately get with the program and work toward goals set by caseworkers. Service plans should focus on what's important to the young person—whether it's playing basketball or reuniting with an estranged parent. A small but growing body of research is finding this approach effective in helping young people develop confidence in their ability to set and reach goals and, ultimately, transition more smoothly to adulthood.

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Many of the New York/New York III programs use some elements of this approach. As the first wave of new programs reaches the end of their first and second years, staff have been discovering their own set of "best practices," which they share with each other at monthly meetings in the downtown offices of the Corporation for Supportive Housing. Some of these practices sound simple, but providers say they have made a big difference in their programs—like taking a walk while meeting with a resident, or bringing them breakfast. Such strategies can make a meeting feel more like a conversation and less like a mandated check-in.

Supervisors at SCO Family of Services, which runs 36 scattered-site apartments in Queens, found that they avoid confusion among residents by clearly splitting up the responsibilities of landlord and counselor among different staff. Other organizations have dropped poorly attended group meetings and focused instead on one-to-one sessions.

Many of the providers say they were initially overwhelmed and unprepared for the mental health issues their clients faced. In response, the Corporation for Supportive Housing hired a clinical consultant who specializes in trauma to be available to all of the housing groups. She meets with caseworkers to help them with particularly challenging cases and to better understand the effects of trauma. Now she also meets regularly with some residents.

But even with this support, New York/New York III providers will not have what the TIP model considers essential: flexible backup plans for young adults who are failing in their programs. So far, this is proving to be one of the program's biggest problems.

The young residents have tested the program in every way possible—from quitting their jobs as soon as they move in, to letting friends move in with them, to not paying rent. Without any backup plan, many providers say they feel they have no choice but to "terminate," or discharge some residents, despite the fact that many have nowhere else to go.

Programs interviewed for this story say they evict between 20 and 50 percent of the residents they accept—a tactic they know is contrary to New York/New York III's mission of serving the neediest young people but which seems to be necessary for the programs' own survival. Reasons for eviction range from the commonplace—a resident refuses to both pay rent and make a plan to do so—to the harrowing—one

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A Pioneering Housing Program Adjusts

NEW YORK CITY has one of the nation's first supportive housing programs designed for adults under the age of 25: the Christopher Residence/Foyer in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan.

"We felt like the missing link for homeless youth was having a specific program that met their needs, rather than building them into existing programs for adults," remembers Denise Hinds, assistant executive director for residential programs at the Foyer.

Launched six years ago as a pilot project, Common Ground Community and Good Shepherd Services modeled the Foyer after a successful European housing program for young adults—with one key difference. The European model has a mix of residents who need different levels of support. The idea is that the low-needs residents—many of whom are working and attending school—can serve as role models for the needier young adults, who will likely eat up more of the program resources.

However, as noted in a recent report released by Common Ground Community and Good Shepherd Services about the Chelsea Foyer's first five years, finding public funding for young adults who are not high needs is almost impossible in the United States. So Common Ground and Good Shepherd Services adapted the model to mix two groups of "high needs" young adults—those who are runaways or homeless, and those who are aging out of foster care.

The program's 40 residents live in a renovated YMCA in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. The building is set up to be a cross between a college dorm and an apartment building, to encourage residents both to feel independent but also to signal that it's not a place to live indefinitely. Young adults are supposed to stay there for no more than two years. During that time, caseworkers help them master life skills, with a focus on learning how to hold down a job. Caseworkers host career workshops, help residents set goals and direct them to job centers. When a young adult is ready to move on from the program, caseworkers help them find housing.

Initially staying true to the evidence-based European model, Good Shepherd Services required references and a letter of intent from all prospective residents, part of an application process designed to attract a number of stable, motivated residents who had a good shot at being self-sufficient in the program's two-year time limit. But keeping the program running has required a creative patchwork of funding, and most funding sources have their own requirements for whom to admit and how to admit them. When the Foyer began accepting 14 young people from the New York/New York III program about two years ago, the program staff adapted their application process to accept more young people with mental health needs and substance-abuse issues. About half of the Foyer's residents now need a high level of support. Hinds concedes that adjusting to this new type of resident has been challenging. "In the Foyer we thought we were going to be dealing with a young person who was better prepared," she says. "But they're not as well prepared. And the work with them is a lot more basic."

Hinds says that staff has now upped the frequency of room inspections from once a month to daily, and two staff must now be on call at night, instead of one.

"Case management has needed to adjust to become more hands-on," the recent report echoes Hinds, adding that case managers now manage some residents' medication or accompany them to doctors' appointments, a practice "that runs counter to the model's core philosophy."

It is too soon to tell what the outcomes will be of these young people who entered the program over the last couple of years. But the program has tracked outcomes of its earlier residents. In the first five years, about one out of every five residents left before they completed the program, often because it was too rigorous and required a high level of motivation, says Hinds. But of those who stayed, the majority were able to se-

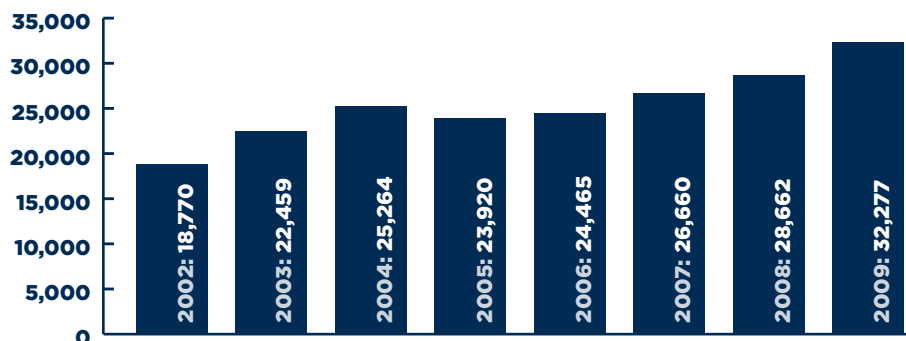
"We felt like the missing link for homeless youth was having a specific program that met their needs, rather than building them into existing programs for adults."

cure stable housing and a job. Seventy-seven percent moved to stable housing, either signing or co-signing a lease or living with a roommate or family member or in a dorm room. Seventy-five percent were employed.

Hinds expects the next generation of Foyer residents to have a tougher time becoming independent. With high rates of unemployment, many of the jobs Foyer residents typically held are now filled by college graduates. "I think across the board kids are going to stay longer with us because they realize it's hard to be on their own with so few resources," she says. "If they don't get the hours they need, then how are they going to pay those rents and sustain themselves?" —Kendra Hurley

YOUNG ADULTS IN CITY HOMELESS SHELTERS

The number of 18- to 29-year-olds receiving services from New York City's Department of Homeless Services has steadily increased since 2002.



Source: NYC Department of Homeless Services

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young woman threw bleach on her roommate, refused counseling, then assaulted her next roommate as well.

Some who get evicted from New York/New York III housing head for the shelter system, providers say. Others simply disappear. Caseworkers at Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services are required to do a "due diligence" check every three months on everyone they lose contact with from their New York/New York III apartments. They check the shelter system, the Department of Corrections, psychiatric hospitals and the morgue.

Alison Harte of the Corporation for Supportive Housing fears that the recent freeze on federal Section 8 rental vouchers in New York means young people leaving foster care who would normally have moved into their own apartments will now find their way into New York/New York III apartments, edging out needier but potentially more difficult-to-manage young people. As it is, many providers say they routinely screen out about a third of the residents who apply.

"If you have a program set up to take really hard-to-serve young people, but you don't have the systems in place to ensure that they get served, then it's going to fail," says Harte. "That's the juncture where we are at with New York/New York III. How do we morph that so it does work for young people?"

...

James McFarlane hopes to be able to answer that question before the year is out. McFarlane is trained as a social worker and has worked as a substance abuse counselor and in foster care prevention programs for more than a decade. When he interviewed to become Louis Nine's program director, staff warned him how hard his job would be. "They did a good job in the interview of trying to scare me," he remembers.

Still, when he became Louis Nine's third program director in under a year, he was surprised at the extent of disarray he inherited. Almost all of the residents had missed multiple

rent payments. Many with serious mental illnesses were refusing to take psychiatric medication and were acting out by cursing out staff. And though the building had been open less than a year, a number of the apartments had holes in the walls or doors, the results of fits of anger.

McFarlane has quickly set about making changes. He's gotten rid of therapeutic-sounding "groups"—a word he thinks has too many connotations with group-home life—and has replaced it with "peer-to-peer discussions," the idea being that residents, not staff, lead building reform.

"I'm trying to put ownership back on the tenants," explains McFarlane. "If they want things to change, they have to police themselves."

A recent peer-to-peer discussion suggests he's onto something. Some of the residents at Louis Nine had poor hygiene, and other tenants complained to no avail. But when residents confronted one another about it in a discussion facilitated by two tenants and monitored by staff, suddenly those who hadn't been bathing began to look after themselves. "Instead of staff counseling these individuals, it was the community turning on itself," says McFarlane. "That kind of peer pressure has created turnaround in some of the behaviors we were seeing."

But McFarlane believes one of the biggest problems facing Louis Nine is what the residents perceive as a lack of consequences for their actions. For example, no one has ever been evicted.

"When they get into the real world, there are consequences. If you don't pay your rent, you get evicted," he says. "You don't perform well on your job, you get fired. You don't meet a person's needs in a relationship, chances are the relationship suffers or it ends. There are always consequences, and I think we need those structures in place to have a better chance at success."

So McFarlane has begun taking residents to court, and since he has been doing that, one resident who was close to being evicted moved into an apartment in Brooklyn with his

“I’m trying to put ownership back on the tenants,” explains McFarlane. “If they want things to change, they have to police themselves.”

partner. McFarlane hopes that for most residents facing a potential eviction, once they realize he’s serious, they’ll do what they need to do to stay in the program.

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For all young adult housing programs, finding the right balance of consequences and compassion is an ongoing experiment. For the New York/New York III programs, how to achieve that balance is an increasingly urgent question. As the programs for young adults leaving foster care enter their second and third years and those for young people leaving mental health facilities prepare to open, the answer may well determine the program’s fate.

In this difficult economy, young adults are more likely to be unemployed. The city is slashing government services for young adults transitioning to adulthood. Young people who in the past may have quickly found gainful employment and moved into apartments with Section 8 vouchers no longer have the option. Now more than even two years ago, New York/New York III is meeting an urgent, critical need, providing young adults a true rarity in the city—affordable housing.

Whether the program can stay true to its original mission to serve the city’s neediest young people (rather than higher-achieving youth) depends, in large part, on whether it can find solutions to two very common problems—on the one hand, young people languishing in the programs and treating them as an extension of their previous group-home lives; on the other, young men and women who get kicked out.

Harte believes there’s a better way. If the programs began housing young adults one or two years before they leave foster care and other institutions, participants would have the chance to learn and make mistakes in their New York/New York III apartments while remaining eligible for the richer clinical supports of the children’s systems. They’d also have the option of moving back to foster care if they found they couldn’t handle the more independent way of life. If they

stayed in the programs, they could remain in the same apartment when they age out of foster care.

New Jersey is already experimenting with this approach, and for years Lighthouse Youth Services in Ohio has placed young people in foster care in their own apartments, then let them take over the leases when they age out.

Here in New York City, it’s hard to imagine changing a new, bold program like New York/New York III in such a radical way, but it might make the difference between whether or not the program stays true to its original intention. In the meantime, it continues to buy its tenants a few years of housing, and the chance to build a self-sufficient life if they’re ready.

Back at Louis Nine, on a warm afternoon, Guzman seems not to know that he’s up next on the list of tenants that McFarlane plans to take to court for not paying rent. Though it’s a weekday, Guzman is home, and is vague on whether or not he is really supposed to be at his training session at Bellevue. His studio apartment, decorated with baseball jerseys, photographs of marijuana plants pulled from magazines, and a photo of his daughter, smells thick of marijuana. Friends drift in and out to visit and smoke cigarettes.

“This place is a comfort zone,” says one friend, who receives money for a psychiatric disability. He’s lounging on Guzman’s bed, which doubles as a couch. “It doesn’t help you at all.”

“They help you if you want to be helped,” Guzman corrects as he washes dishes. “But 25 to 75 percent of them don’t want help.”

“You know, my brother wants me to move with him to Ohio,” Guzman adds, as he drifts onto a new thought and a new plan. “That would be a new experience for me. I’ve never tried that before. Don’t get me wrong. I would love to be here five years. Well, I’m not saying love. But as long as I’m here, I have a roof over my head.”

In the end, Guzman had that roof only a few more months. Before the year was over, he became the third resident to be evicted from Louis Nine. ❖



Others began to believe he might be able to help them, too. The job club became popular with nearly all of the young adults. “Word got around we were serious,” he remembers.

Terrance Talley chats with resident Joel Meeks in Schafer Hall's sunny courtyard.

Housing That Works

Among the lessons: clear expectations
and a firm but flexible staff.

BY KENDRA HURLEY

SCHAFER HALL, an East Harlem housing program for young people making the transition from foster care to independence, has had its ups and downs. A few years back, residents used to slam doors and play music loudly late into the night. They would curse out security, loiter in front of the building and sometimes become angry and threatening when asked to move on. Police or security filled out “incident reports” about unruly residents 15 times a month.

“It was a madhouse,” recalls Terrance Talley, a towering man with a gentle manner who has run Schafer Hall since 2003. Many of the young people did not pay their rent and were not working. Those who did work would keep jobs for only about two months at a time. Schafer Hall, a 91-unit building run by the Lantern Organization, also houses families and singles with disabilities. But the older adults and families living in the building wanted nothing to do with the young.

Getting a program like this right requires finding a staff that is firm, patient and flexible and that knows how to set clear expectations for the residents. Most of all, it requires the leadership of someone like Talley, who knows how to engage all kinds of young people.

Talley decided his first challenge would be winning over the young people’s trust and getting them to feel ownership over their new home. To do that, he organized a job club and social events, like potlucks. At first, only a few residents attended. But when several residents who attended Talley’s job club got steady jobs, the others began to believe he might be able to help them, too. The job club became popular with nearly all of the young adults. “Word got around we were serious,” he remembers.

Carmen, now 28, was not an early joiner. When she arrived at Schafer Hall the same year as Talley, she was thrilled to have her own studio apartment. But she was furious that she still had to obey institutional rules—like signing in and out with security. “She came in very angry, cursing out every staff member. She did not want any social services,” says Talley.

Carmen would explode at caseworkers charged with renewing her housing voucher or public assistance. She lost her temper at bosses and anyone else who crossed her, says Talley. In her first months in the program, she jumped from one job to another and had little to do with others in the building.

“I used to smoke weed and ran the streets,” Carmen remembers. “I was doing me.”

Talley began to wonder what it would take to bring her into the fold. One day Talley convinced her to join a social gathering. Soon Talley discovered in Carmen that thing he searches for in every young person he works with—what they’re most passionate about. Carmen liked cooking.

Getting residents to cook and eat more healthfully was something Talley had pushing for a while. He’d even bought a cookbook for the building and encouraged everyone to share their favorite dishes at potlucks. Talley encouraged Carmen’s cooking creations as well, which she began sharing with others in the building. Before long she was also helping Talley to organize social events—building trips to Splish Splash, Great Adventures and movies.

All of this gave Talley an opening to work with Carmen on what he saw as her biggest weakness: her people skills.

Schafer staff practiced role plays with Carmen to help her see how she might appear to others. In one role play, a store owner forgets to take down its “hiring” sign after it had finished hiring. The store owner explains this to a job hunter, saying that she’ll hold onto her résumé for the next time they are hiring. This fails to console the job hunter, who loses her temper at the store owner for not having taken the sign down.

“Wow, that’s ignorant,” Carmen said about the job hunter’s reaction. It was like a light bulb had gone off for her, Talley remembers.

Talley began attending every benefit appointment with Carmen and always debriefed with her afterwards. At first, Carmen continued to blow up at these meetings, says Talley. When he tried to get to the root of why, she’d shrug, “Just the way the person looked at me.”

Gradually that changed. Once when Talley sensed Carmen was about to explode at a Section 8 caseworker, he tapped her foot with his under the table. It was a simple gesture, one to make her aware of that moment just before she lost her temper. This time, she held it in. After the meeting, Carmen was bursting with pride. “I did good, yeah?” she said.

Another time, waiting in a mind-numbingly slow line for public assistance, a woman who was bottle-feeding a baby in front of Carmen accidentally squirted her in the face with milk. This was the type of thing that normally caused Carmen to explode. Talley braced himself. Then Carmen did something she never would have done if she were still the angry teenager who had signed herself into foster care after fleeing an abusive home. “She looked at me and said, ‘Do you have a piece of tissue so that I can wipe my face?’” Talley remembers. “Then she said, ‘That was good, Terrance, right?’ And I said, ‘Yes, Carmen, that was good.’”

Talley knows that these triumphs might sound small when one considers all it takes for a young man or woman to become completely independent. But it’s little moments like this, says Talley, that add up to real change in a young person’s life.

“Carmen benefited from constant attention,” says Talley.

The key ingredient, he says, is having staff who know how to adapt, “somebody who’s willing to take on that job full force and be really persistent, and talk to each person differently,” says Talley. “You can’t just come in here thinking you are going to be a dictator barking orders.”

Of course, there are more concrete things Talley did to turn around Schafer Hall’s young adult program besides being flexible. He learned, for instance, that it was important to house the “leaders” who stir things up apart from the other residents. “Don’t put them side by side, because they’ll recreate the group home,” he says, echoing some research that suggests housing young people with similar issues to-

gether is not a good move. “They’ll all be smoking weed. They’ll bond together and form units. Then when two are mad at each other, the whole unit is fighting.”

He also overhauled the building’s intake process, realizing that he needed to be very clear during interviews with potential residents that the goal of Schafer Hall was not merely to house them but to make them self-sufficient. Just sending this message, he says, created a “totally different dynamic.” He rarely rejects prospective tenants, but sometimes young people decide on their own not to come after they understand what the program entails.

Today, in Schafer Hall’s sunny lobby, residents say “hey” to each other. Young people and older adults alike pop into Talley’s office to use the fax machine, the computers, or just chat. With comfortable couches and chairs, it’s set up to encourage lingering. Talley says the building now averages only about two incidents a month. Of the 25 young adults currently in the building, none is on public assistance and 22 are working, even though all have disabilities. (Two of the three who aren’t employed cannot work because of their disabilities.) Seventeen of those 22 who are employed hold fulltime jobs, many as security guards or in retail. One works as a reality show casting agent for MTV, says Talley. Two no longer qualify for Section 8 because their incomes are too high, and they’ve chosen to pay full rent while they finish school and find a new place to live.

When Talley speaks of the triumphs of the few original residents who still live there, he beams. One young man who loved sports began volunteering to work with young people at the Police Athletic League. Eventually he got certified to teach sports, became a coach’s assistant at a recreation complex in Yorkville and is now the head coach.

Another young woman “came in disillusioned with the foster care system” and “mistrustful,” says Talley. But with the help of an on-site therapist, she began opening up to staff at Schafer Hall, updating them regularly on her accomplishments: first that she’d completed her first year at City College, then that she was graduating from City College, next that she’d passed the LSATs, and now that she has been offered a scholarship to Ohio State Law School, which Talley helped her secure. “She wants to be a lawyer for children’s rights,” says Talley, nodding, as if he expected it from day one.

Carmen is a success story, too. She now lives with her daughter in a one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, which she pays for with her Section 8 voucher and her income as a licensed security guard working at two different jobs. Carmen continues to check in with Schafer Hall whenever she’s in the area, usually to look at job listings, to see if there’s something better for her out there, but sometimes just to say hi. And she’s arrived somewhere she never anticipated—she says she’s in a good place in life. “I’m older now,” she says. “I have to worry about my daughter. It’s not about me anymore. I’m happy where I’m at now.” ❀

A six-year statistical survey monitoring New York City's child welfare system

WATCHING THE NUMBERS

PROTECTIVE SERVICES

| | FY 05 | FY 06 | FY 07 | FY 08 | FY 09 | FY10 |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| REPORTS OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT: | 50,251 | 62,585 | 64,190 | 64,572 | 64,748 | 65,114 |
| The pace of state hotline reports remains very high for the fifth year in a row. | | | | | | |
| PERCENTAGE OF REPORTS SUBSTANTIATED: | 32.6 | 36.7 | 39.8 | 39.9 | 42.1 | 41.9 |
| Child protective workers find reason to suspect abuse or neglect in two-fifths of all reports. | | | | | | |
| PENDING RATE: | 6.1 | 7.5 | 6.0 | 5.4 | 4.8 | 4.5 |
| The monthly average of new cases per child protective worker continues to fall. | | | | | | |
| AVERAGE CHILD PROTECTIVE CASELOAD: | 12.1 | 16.5 | 15.1 | 11.6 | 9.6 | 9.1 |
| Caseloads were at the lowest they've been in over a decade. | | | | | | |
| CHILD FATALITIES IN CASES KNOWN TO ACS (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR): | 33 | 30 | 44 | 41 | 49 | 39 |

PREVENTIVE SERVICES

| | | | | | | |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| FAMILIES RECEIVING ACS-CONTRACTED PREVENTIVE SERVICES (ANNUAL, CUMULATIVE): | NA | NA | 22,912 | 23,809 | 24,788 | 23,063 |
| ACS has changed the way it tracks use of preventive services. This is a new indicator. | | | | | | |
| NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN PREVENTIVE CASES (ACTIVE, JUNE): | 29,405 | 28,663 | 30,358 | 33,022 | 31,584 | 27,532 |
| The number of families in preventive programs began to drop sharply in late spring 2010. | | | | | | |
| PERCENT OF PREVENTIVE CASES REFERRED BY ACS: | 49 | 52 | 68 | 76 | 68 | 64 |
| Nearly two-thirds of new cases referred to general preventive agencies come from ACS. | | | | | | |

FOSTER CARE SERVICES

| | | | | | | |
|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| NUMBER OF CHILDREN ADMITTED TO FOSTER CARE: | 4,813 | 6,213 | 7,132 | 7,460 | 7,474 | 7,086 |
| The number of children placed in care remains above 7,000 for a fourth year. | | | | | | |
| NUMBER OF CHILDREN DISCHARGED FROM FOSTER CARE: | 7,907 | 6,625 | 7,219 | 7,587 | 7,557 | 7,181 |
| Discharges continue to keep pace with admissions. | | | | | | |
| TOTAL FOSTER CARE POPULATION (ANNUAL AVERAGE): | 18,950 | 16,645 | 16,854 | 16,701 | 16,440 | 15,895 |
| The total number of children in foster care continues to decline. | | | | | | |
| MEDIAN LENGTH OF STAY FOR CHILDREN BEFORE RETURN TO PARENTS (MONTHS): | 8.2 | 10.3 | 11.5 | 9.3 | 8.3 | 5.3 |
| Children entering foster care for the first time are returning home more quickly. | | | | | | |
| PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH REUNIFICATION GOAL (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR): | 44.3 | 45.5 | 55.3 | 51.3 | 51.6 | 51.1 |
| More than half of the children in foster care in December 2009 were expected to return home. | | | | | | |
| PERCENTAGE OF SEPARATED SIBLINGS (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR): | 50.7 | 49.3 | 47 | 48.3 | 44.2 | 48.1 |
| The sibling separation rate has increased. | | | | | | |
| RECIDIVISM RATE (%) (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR): | 13.6 | 11.5 | 9.1 | 10.0 | 12.3 | 11.3 |
| This is the percentage of children returning to foster care within two years of discharge. | | | | | | |
| PERCENTAGE OF FOSTER CHILDREN IN KINSHIP CARE: | 24.6 | 24.3 | 28.3 | 32.3 | 33.9 | 35.0 |
| Kinship placements now represent more than one-third of the foster care system. | | | | | | |
| PERCENTAGE OF FOSTER BOARDING HOME PLACEMENTS IN BOROUGH OF ORIGIN: | 76.8 | 74.1 | 65.7 | 54.0 | 57.8 | 58.9 |
| The rate of in-borough placements is climbing slowly. | | | | | | |
| PERCENTAGE OF FOSTER BOARDING HOME PLACEMENTS IN COMMUNITY DISTRICT: | 21.7 | 17.8 | 13.5 | 11.2 | 11.2 | 10.5 |
| CWW continues to report the original measure, although ACS has changed its approach to measuring community-based placement. | | | | | | |

ADOPTION SERVICES

| | | | | | | |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH ADOPTION AS A GOAL (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR): | 39.8 | 37.4 | 31.0 | 29.2 | 28.0 | 30.3 |
| The rate of foster children moving toward adoption remains near previous low levels. | | | | | | |
| NUMBER OF FINALIZED ADOPTIONS: | 2,364 | 1,831 | 1,562 | 1,472 | 1,344 | 1,165 |
| Finalized adoptions continue to fall as more children return home. | | | | | | |
| AVERAGE TIME TO COMPLETE ADOPTIONS (YEARS): | 3.4 | 3.5 | 3.4 | 3.4 | 3.2 | 3.2 |
| This number has remained constant for nearly a decade. | | | | | | |

Sources: NYC Mayor's Management Report, NY State Office of Children and Family Services Monitoring and Analysis Profiles, NYC Citywide Performance Report, NYC Administration for Children's Services Monthly Flash and data requests.

CHILD WELFARE WATCH is a project of the Center for New York City Affairs at Milano The New School for Management and Urban Policy.

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Photography: Jacqueline Lane
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Child Welfare Watch is made possible thanks to the generous support of the Child Welfare Fund, the Ira W. DeCamp Foundation, the Viola W. Bernard Foundation and the Sirus Fund.

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Published June 2010

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