FOSTER CARE

READY OR NOT

PREPARING YOUNG PEOPLE TO BE ON THEIR OWN IS ESSENTIAL AS THEY TRANSITION OUT OF FOSTER CARE.

BY NINA WILLIAMS-MBENGUE
Eighteen is an awfully young age to be all on your own. Yet, that’s when some 18,000 kids “age out” of foster care each year, whether or not they are ready or mature enough. These are the teenagers who haven’t been adopted, who don’t have relatives to live with and who can’t return home to their biological families.

Many of them bear the scars of physical abuse or emotional trauma and enter adulthood with few, if any, connections to caring grown-ups. This puts them at a high risk for school failure, teen pregnancy, homelessness, unemployment and incarceration.

Recognizing the challenges these kids face, state legislators are finding ways to help them transition to adulthood. “The investment we make in those children today,” says North Carolina Senator Tamara Barringer (R), “will pay off many times in the future by having them be productive citizens rather than being in prison or having early pregnancies or substance abuse issues. This is an investment in our future and it’s going to pay off tremendously, not just in the lives of these children but for our whole society, making it so much stronger.”

Here are six “investments” that look likely to pay off in the future.

1. **Raise the exit age from 18 to 21.**

Most young people, well into their 20s, have parents or relatives to help them navigate important milestones to adulthood, like going on a date, learning to drive, opening a savings account, applying for college, buying a car, leasing an apartment and getting a job. But for some youth, there may not be a relative, or any adult, to walk them through this process or catch them should they fall.

Federal law offers states financial reimbursement for youth who stay in foster care up to age 21 through Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, which addresses child welfare issues. Approximately 25 states and the District of Columbia now take advantage of this option, which can result in kids achieving higher educational levels and greater economic successes.

Giving young people the option to stay in foster care until age 21 has also proved to reduce their involvement in state criminal justice systems.

Barringer spearheaded the effort in North Carolina, in 2015, to extend foster care to age 21 under the Title IV-E option. As a former therapeutic foster parent who adopted three children from care, Barrin-

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**SENATOR TAMARA BARRINGER, NORTH CAROLINA**

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2. **Offer kids age-appropriate activities.**

Gaining a caseworker’s permission for every little decision involving a child can be so tedious that foster parents don’t even try.

To allow parents to make decisions regarding their foster children’s everyday activities, Congress passed, and the president signed, the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act in 2014. Modeled on legislation enacted in Florida, it instructs states to set a “reasonable and prudent” standard to guide parenting decisions.

Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia have enacted a reasonable and prudent parenting standard in statute. In these states, foster parents no longer have to obtain caseworker permission for sleepovers, school trips or sporting events. Being involved in such everyday activities helps all young people, but especially those in foster care, learn about themselves, build confidence and become responsible. Just ask Keola Limkin.

Limkin entered foster care three different times in his three years in Hawaii’s system before graduating from high school. He went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in psychology and communications at the University of Hawaii and is currently pursuing a master’s degree in social work. He says like Barringer, says that “children do not have the skills to take care of themselves mentally, emotionally or physically at age 18. We can spend that extra time teaching them job-specific skills, helping them to decide where their interests and passions lie and providing them with the job training they need to pursue their passion.”

Nina Williams-Mbengue manages NCSL’s Child Welfare Project.
the activities he participated in fostered his social and emotional development.

“By joining the judo and wrestling teams, I established friendships, stayed out of trouble and gained experiences that enhanced my college résumé,” Limkin says.

One of his goals is to become a “wrap-around services” facilitator for families with kids in the child welfare system.

Help them get a driver’s license and a bank account.

Barringer, from North Carolina, also worked on legislation to help kids in care earn their driver’s licenses and learn about car insurance. “Time and again, the aged-out foster youth that I see regularly have told me how much a barrier it is that they cannot drive an automobile,” she says.

“Most of our counties do not have good public transportation, so they can’t get to school, they can’t get to work, they can’t carry on a normal adult life. Not only that, many of the jobs that they apply for require a driver’s license. Not only is it a convenience or a personal matter, it is also an occupational matter.”

During last year’s legislative sessions, lawmakers in several states enacted laws to reduce the costs of driver’s education and training or to direct the department of child welfare to pay for it.

Lawmakers also have enacted measures that allow adults other than a biological parent to give permission for a driver’s permit and for young drivers to buy their own car insurance.

Other state laws reduce or waive auto insurance fees, or reimburse foster parents for the cost of insurance.

Also along the path to adulthood comes the privilege of owning a bank account. Lawmakers in California, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas, Washington, West Virginia and Wyoming have passed laws to ensure that youth transitioning out of foster care get assistance setting up savings accounts.

In addition, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Texas, Virginia and Washington require general financial education, including how to save money, how to handle a checking account, budgeting for expenses, understanding credit and more.

Empower young people to advocate for themselves.

Young people can make a difference in crafting policy and maintaining oversight if lawmakers give them a chance to be engaged in their case planning. Some lawmakers are ensuring that young people are asked about their experiences in care and about how prepared they feel they are to transition into adulthood.

Barringer is especially impressed with a group called SAYSO (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out). SAYSO is a statewide association of youth between the ages of 14 and 24 who are or have been in North Carolina’s foster care system. Its members support other youth, encouraging them to speak out on improving the system. “SAYSO ... worked with me on the 2015 legislation to extend foster care to 21 and

People think of them as disposable.

DELEGATE C.T. WILSON, MARYLAND

on legislation to help youth in care get driver’s licenses,” Barringer says. “They continue to provide information and feedback to me. It’s one thing to enact legislation, it’s another to get feedback on how it’s really working.”

Several states have developed a “foster youth capitol day,” when kids meet with legislators at state capitols to learn about the legislative process and how to advocate for themselves.

Maryland now includes at least one foster student in its annual page program, providing housing, if needed, Maryland Delegate C.T. Wilson (D), a former foster child, says.

“Foster children have not been able to participate in the program because they do not have any place to stay during the weeklong program,” he says. “I know quite a few delegates who began their careers in the page program.”

Make college a real possibility.

Children in foster care, historically, do not do as well in school as other students, which limits their higher education options.

By age 18, only 50 percent of young people in foster care have graduated from high school, and only 20 percent of those who graduate go to college.

According to the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, a mere 2 percent to 9 percent of former foster children obtain a bachelor’s degree.

Why? Frequent school changes during elementary and high school; a lack of consistency in the curriculum; poor communication among schools, caseworkers and students; and delays in school enrollment all play a part. But the biggest obstacle is the high cost of higher education.
Twenty-eight states offer tuition waivers or scholarship programs to former foster kids. Less common are programs to help former foster students navigate the maze of college applications, forms and financing by offering:

- Support in completing high school
- Assistance in applying for and entering college
- Individualized support in academics, health, housing, life skills, relationships, identity, finances and employment
- Assistance with housing, during both the academic year and breaks
- Tutoring and supplemental instruction
- Assistance in applying for financial aid
- Help in preparing for graduate or professional school, or
- Career development guidance.

Attack homelessness among foster youth.

Another troubling statistic is that 40 percent of youth who have aged out of foster care, often at age 18, at some point end up homeless and on the streets. Foster youth are at high risk for homelessness if they have run away from foster care before, have lived in several foster homes, have been abused or have a mental health disorder.

Being homeless makes going to college nearly impossible. But finding affordable, stable housing can be challenging.

“With a little bit of help, I would have been able to live safely on campus all four years,” says Limkin, the former foster student in Hawaii. But after his first two years, he lost priority in the limited dorms and had to stay with friends. “I had to couch-surf and resort to temporary housing in places that were not the most stable. This caused me avoidable confusion and anxiety when I should’ve been more focused on my studies.”

Young people who find and maintain stable housing are more likely to stay in school, keep their jobs and seek mental and physical health care when needed, according to a recent survey of research on foster-youth housing by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

To help, lawmakers may want to consider:

- Extending foster care beyond age 18 and offering “supervised independent living services” that allow young people to live on their own while still receiving casework and other supportive services
- Developing a variety of housing options and transitional-living programs that teach young people how to keep and maintain housing
- Allowing foster youth to live with their biological and foster siblings
- Waiving requirements that may be difficult to meet, such as rental fees and housing or apartment applications, and
- Keeping housing subsidies on par with inflation and cost-of-living increases.

Offering Opportunities

If foster kids are to successfully transition from the child welfare system to lives as independent adults, they’ll need all the support they can get. Lawmakers can help by making their needs a priority.

“Nobody really thinks about foster children on a regular basis,” Maryland’s Wilson says. “Children and youth in care are wards of the state, and I believe we should treat them as our children, offering them the same opportunities for advancement and removing the many hurdles that the system often sets in their way.”

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**Extending a Hand for College**

What states offer former foster youth to help with the costs of attending college

- Tuition waivers
- Scholarships or grants

Note: Arizona’s five-year tuition-waiver pilot project expires this year.

Sources: NCSL, WestLaw, Education Commission of the States, Wayne State University