

Bill would help older foster youths in California

jsanders@sacbee.com Published Tuesday, Mar. 10, 2009

California forces foster youths to fend for themselves by their late teens, but newly proposed legislation would change that.

Assembly Bill 12 would offer transitional services to California's nearly 80,000 foster youths until they turn 21.

Assembly Speaker Karen Bass, Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg and California Supreme Court Associate Justice Carlos R. Moreno were among supporters Monday who touted AB 12 at a Capitol news conference.

Bass said AB 12 would lead to more hope and less crime or homelessness for youths who don't live with their parents and have nowhere to turn.

"Just like our (own) kids, foster kids need a safety net," said Bass, D-Los Angeles.

California currently pushes youths from the foster system when they turn 18 – or one year later if they're on track for a high school diploma.

"We have to do a whole lot more," said Steinberg, D-Sacramento.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger released a statement supporting the concept, saying he is committed to a bipartisan solution that ensures foster youths are "provided with the tools needed to succeed at life."

AB 12 is an attempt to boost services by making the state eligible for about \$70 million in new federal funds for foster programs.

California could qualify for the federal subsidy by leveraging some existing state and local funds spent on foster care, said Assemblyman Jim Beall, D-San Jose, who joined with Bass to propose AB 12.

The bill is being fine-tuned, but the goal is to offer housing subsidies and other assistance for the 4,500 foster teens who leave the system each year in their late teens.

No formal opposition to AB 12 has surfaced, Beall said.

Kevin West, 20, a former foster youth from Santa Cruz, said he was forced from his group home the night he turned 18 and was homeless until the family of a high school classmate took him in.

"I truly believe that every foster youth deserves the chance I was given," said West, who attends community college and hopes to become a social worker.

"They deserve all we can do for them – and then some," said Democrat John Burton, former Senate president pro tem.

Monday's event touted research on foster youth from three states – those who remained in state care until 21 in Illinois, and others who were forced out of the system at 18 in Wisconsin and Iowa.

Foster youths who remained in care until 21 were three times more likely to enroll in college, 65 percent less likely to be arrested, and 38 percent less likely to get pregnant as teenagers, according to the report by researchers from the University of Washington and Chapin Hall Center for Children, an independent research facility at the University of Chicago.

Supporting foster youths until they turn 21 increases their lifetime earning potential by at least \$92,000, said Mark Courtney, a co-author of the study from the University of Washington.

Call Jim Sanders, Bee Capitol Bureau, (916) 326-5538.