

## California legislators consider extending foster care through age 21

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A bevy of bipartisan California legislators vowed Monday to be better parents to the state's foster youth, pledging to extend their life-sustaining benefits through age 21 rather than casting them off as teenagers.

Currently, most youth "aging out" of foster care are bounced off state support at 18, a tender age for a vulnerable population that often has nowhere to go and no one to rely on. But an assembly bill written by Speaker Karen Bass, D-Los Angeles, and Assemblyman Jim Beall, D-San Jose, would draw on newly available federal funds to support relative caregivers and transitional living programs through age 21.

Former foster youth who gathered in the state Capitol on Monday in support of the bill described their loneliness and desperation as they entered the adult world with no money, no job, nowhere to live and, in many cases, no family or stable adults to rely on.

Many, if not most, foster youth depart from group homes or foster families with only a list of referrals and a bag full of their stuff. A lucky few may find an apartment in a transitional housing program, or get help applying for welfare benefits.

"You would think age 18 would be the time to celebrate being a young adult, but for foster youth it's not a time to celebrate at all," said Kanisha Green, a 20-year-old San Jose State University sophomore. "You go into worrying mode, and that affects your schooling, it affects your whole mind frame — some people just give up."

Green, who "couch-surfed" from age 14 through 18 after her elderly grandmother could no longer care for her, is among the 1 to 5 percent of foster youth who actually make it in college. It was no small feat. As a young teen, she played every sport offered at her high school, just to have somewhere to be when classes let out each day.

AB 12 would support Green and more than 5,000 others like her as they enter their critical transition years. Although the state's finances could not be more woeful, there are potentially two new funding streams available, after passage last year of a groundbreaking federal foster care law. Put together, extending foster care benefits into young adulthood could save money for California taxpayers, according to the Legislative Analyst's Office.

The foster care extension, if passed, would be optional for foster youth, and not all are not expected to choose to remain in care for the entire three years. According to figures released Monday, each foster youth would require approximately \$13,000 from the federal government each year, and roughly \$25,000 from the state and counties. But those caregiving costs that now come out of state and county budgets could be offset with the new federal money.

AB 12 appears to be drawing widespread support. Monday, Bass and Beall were joined in a news conference by Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento; Secretary of the California Health and Human Services Agency Kim Belshé and state Supreme Court Justice Carlos Moreno.

Republican legislators also voiced support, and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger lauded the benefits extension that could begin October 2010.

"I am committed to working with Assembly Speaker Karen Bass and Senate Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg on a bipartisan solution that ensures our children and youth in foster care are provided with the tools needed to succeed at life," Schwarzenegger said in a prepared statement.

Beall said the state had a "moral" duty to help the foster kids. "They're our responsibility and if we're going to be responsible parents, we shouldn't send them out on the streets at age 18 because literally they'll be on the streets."

A study released Monday from respected child welfare researchers at the universities of Washington and Chicago was timed with the AB 12 announcement, and predicts that extending foster care would be a wise investment for California. The report, part of an expansive, multiyear study of young people exiting the foster care system, compared Illinois — where foster care lasts through age 21 — with Wisconsin and Iowa. In Illinois, young adults were three times more likely to enroll in college and 65 percent less likely to be arrested. Young women were 38 percent less likely to become pregnant.

Those outcomes would be welcome in California, where state research shows one in four former foster youth face incarceration within two years of leaving the system, and one in five becoming homeless within a year and a half.

San Jose State University senior Kevin Givan, 23, is busy defying those odds.

"When you get out of the system, you've got to get an apartment, you've got to get health care, you've got to get your own money — you feel so lost," Givan said. "It took me two years to stabilize and understand how I'm supposed to live."

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