

New state law could help foster kids past age 18

By SAMANTHA SCHAEFER / THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER



The transition from high school to emancipation happened in a matter of days for Shawna Thomas.

The day before graduation, the 18 year-old was alone in front of a judge as a foster youth for the last time. Two days later, her bags were packed and she was leaving her Santa Ana foster home.

Former foster youth Shawna Thomas, 23, is with her 2-year-old son Ayden at their Westminster apartment. Thomas has used a number of transitional housing programs since emancipating when she was 18, and is now a peer mentor at the Orangewood Center. California's AB 12 will increase youth eligibility for the foster care system from 18 to 21 if they meet certain requirements.

Thomas, now 23, said she was lucky to be accepted to a transitional housing program for former foster youth through the Orangewood Children's Foundation because she had nowhere else to go.

"It's that quick. That's why a lot of foster youth end up on the streets," Thomas said.

Foster youth will be eligible to remain in the system and receive housing assistance and support until they are 21 under a state law that affects youth who are 18 on or after Jan. 1.

When foster youth are on their own at 18, they are much more likely to face homelessness, joblessness, pregnancy or incarceration than the general population. Those statistics decrease for young adults who remain in assistance programs. Youth with extended support past 18 are twice more likely to complete a college degree than those without it.

AB 12, signed by former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2010, aligns the state with federal funding opportunities created by the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. Youth who opt to remain in foster care must meet one of five eligibility requirements, such as employment for 80 hours a month or enrollment in college, and must live in an approved residence.

The county Social Services Agency has been discussing the bill with caregivers and educating staff on how to work with older youth, said Anne Bloxom, deputy director of the agency. Social workers already assigned to youth will likely stay with them, she said. The county does not have the funding to increase its staff.

The young adults who remain in the program will have access to housing assistance, as well as help with college and vocational schools, or the support they need to get there, Bloxom said.

"The only thing that will change is the way we approach the young adult," Bloxom said. "They have a much bigger say in the decision making. [The program is] not mandatory; they can decide this is what they want or they can decide this is not what they want."

Now, Thomas works as a peer mentor at Orangewood. She assists discussion groups with foster youth approaching emancipation on topics such as finance, hygiene, sex and STDs, and bullying, and she helps them get access to needed resources. A lot of the stories she hears are similar to her own – abandonment, abuse, and youth who are sheltered and run wild once they're in control.

After being adopted out of foster care at 10, Thomas was home-schooled for nearly seven years before she returned to the system because her adoptive home was unsafe. She was isolated from peer-pressure and adolescent life for most of her youth, and when she was free to make her own decisions, she said she didn't take her situation as seriously as she should have.

She didn't realize the money she made from her part-time job in high school was all she would have to live on when she graduated. No one taught her how to save money or what she should spend it on; so she blew it in the first six months she was on her own, signed up for credit cards, and got into debt. She wasn't sure what community college classes to register for, and didn't realize the consequences of having unprotected sex until she got pregnant with her son Ayden when she was 20.

Thomas is still working through her problems, but having her son, now 2, was a wake up call, she said. A number of transitional housing programs run by nonprofit organizations, such as Orangewood and Olive Crest, have helped her save money and pay rent. She and Ayden recently moved into a Westminster apartment with the help of one of these programs. Thomas works a second job as a personal assistant at a salon, and is studying child and adolescent development at Santa Ana College.

"Being 18, you're still young, and you don't know everything. We feel that we do, but we really don't," she said. "If [foster youth] had more time to prepare themselves, [a lot of bad decisions] could be avoided."

There are a number of different housing options for youth, all with the goal of moving them toward independence, Bloxom said. Most will not be ready for their own apartment when they are 18, she said, but there are other options, such as dorm settings, to help the young adults transition to being on their own.

The way the courts approach the young adults under the extended care will shift, as well. Rather than focusing on how to reunite them with family, the emphasis will be on working toward independence, Bloxom said.

Crystal Cortez, 20, a former foster youth, said most kids don't like the system, but learn to appreciate its services when they grow up. Foster youth don't have regular families to teach or support them when they're older, and extended care would give them that safety net, she said.

"We refer to the younger generation as boomerangs because they keep going home, but these kids don't have a home to go to, so this helps launch them," said TerryLynn Fisher, spokeswoman for the agency.

When implementing extended foster services, counties should target the most desperate cases, according to a November study of Los Angeles County youth. Those who enroll in college or get a job need fewer public resources later on in life. The study, funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation,

looked at services used by foster and "crossover youth," those involved in both foster care and the juvenile justice system, after emancipation.

Within four years of exiting the system, 82 percent of crossover youth and 68 percent of former foster youth used public welfare benefits. Crossover youth cost more than \$35,000, more than twice what foster youth cost during those four years. Providing early support for this population, particularly crossover youth, will create more positive outcomes for them in the long run and will likely save public resources, the study said.

When it comes to the budget, the effect of increased support on the county is very small, Fisher said. Most of the agency's \$2.4 billion annual budget is federally funded, with about 7 percent from the county, she said.

An estimated 200 youth in Orange County will enter the program by the end of next year, Bloxom said. The county does not anticipate further strain on its services, but Bloxom said she hopes community resources will expand to meet the needs of this population.

Thomas and Ayden are settling into the bright, sparsely decorated apartment they moved into a few months ago.

The boy hid behind the bedroom door on a recent visit, a Buzz Lightyear blanket and his round, dimpled cheek revealing his location. His artwork and finger-paintings from day care hang on a nearby wall above his toys. Thomas said she isn't sure if she'll be able to afford her new home once the assistance program ends, but she's going to try.

The new foster care law

Assembly Bill 12, the Fostering Connections to Success Act, was signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Sept. 30, 2010. Under the law, about one in five foster youth will be eligible for extended care until they turn 21.

Extended foster care is voluntary, and youth who wish to receive services beyond 18 must remain under the supervision of juvenile court and meet certain requirements including employment or enrollment in education.

Youth have the option of living in seven types of state-approved residences, including the home of an approved relative, a licensed foster family, a certified foster family agency home, some licensed group homes or transitional housing programs. The added support is expected to improve the future for former foster youth who are at a higher risk of homelessness, unemployment, teen pregnancy and public assistance when they "age out" of foster care at 18. The law takes effect on a rolling basis beginning with foster youth who are 18 on or after Jan. 1.

The law aligns California with the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions act of 2008, making the state eligible for funding.

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