

New state law gives foster youth time to bloom

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JOSEPH SCHELL/SPECIAL TO THE SF EXAMINER

Aged out: Timajae Evans, 20, is thriving after leaving foster care at 19, but says many aren't so lucky.

Timajae Evans spent his teenage years in foster care, moving from one group home to another. When he aged out of the system at 19, he had to grow up fast.

“It kind of threw me off for the first month,” Evans said, recalling the sudden responsibility of having to pay his own bills and shop for his own groceries.

Evans, now 20, lives by himself in a Daly City apartment. He is taking general studies courses at City College of San Francisco and hopes to become an auto mechanic. But while he said he was thriving on his own, he was happy to hear about a new law that will let current foster children stay in the system until they turn 21.

“Usually, kids that are aging out, they don't have anywhere to go,” he said. “They don't have the support system that they need.”

The California Fostering Connections to Success Act took effect Jan. 1. Previously, most foster children aged out of the system at 18, although current high school students could apply for a special dispensation for more time, as Evans did. The new law will raise the age limit to 21 by 2014, as long as a young person holds down a job or attends school.

“It just opened the door a lot wider in allowing youth to have some stability after they turn 18,” said Maya Webb, foster youth services coordinator with the San Francisco Unified School District.

High school students who leave foster care right at 18 can run into trouble on the way to graduation, Webb said. And looming independence can be a distraction from schoolwork.

“I expect it to reduce the immediate stress of turning 18,” Webb said. “All of these milestones don’t have to be so rushed and so imminent.”

Tina Dollison, who runs the group home where Evans once lived, welcomes the new law, because many of the teens she works with aren’t ready to be on their own. But Dollison worried that the law might give some young people an excuse not to plan for the future.

“I feel like for some of them, it will allow them to just procrastinate and not get their act together,” she said.

Nefertiti Franks, 18, who lives in Dollison’s group home, acknowledged that some teens would probably put off the inevitable as long as they could. But she was hoping the new law would help her finish high school and get started at college.

“I’m not grown up all the way, but I’m getting there,” Franks said. “For the youth that want to shoot high, they’re going to need help if they’re going to get off on the right foot.”

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Care concerns

1,200 Foster youths in San Francisco

100,000 Foster youths in California

65% State foster youths who age out of the system without a place to live

45% Unemployed among aged-out foster youths in California

30% Aged-out foster youths in California who are on welfare

Sources: Healthier SF, United Way of the Bay Area

Read more at the San Francisco Examiner: <http://www.sfxaminer.com/local/2012/01/giving-foster-youth-time-bloom#ixzz1jMnuhEie>