



FEDERATION OF PROTESTANT WELFARE AGENCIES

Automatic Medicaid for Youth Aging out of Foster Care

FPWA led successful efforts to ensure that automatic extension of Medicaid eligibility to youth aging out of foster care until age 21 was included in the Governors' FY2008-2009 budget. As a result, crucial health and mental health services are available for some of New York's most vulnerable children: youth who are struggling to leave the foster care system behind and establish themselves as self-sufficient young adults. Although FPWA believes the enactment of this legislation is a major victory and large step to ensuring that youth who age out of foster care are able to access health care, we are continuing to work on this issue by advocating for the full implementation of automatic Medicaid for youth aging out of foster care.

FPWA has long been concerned about the needs of youth aging out of the foster care system and the importance of expanding services to meet their needs. Unlike their peers, foster care youth who age out of the child welfare system have few supports and little to no adult or family guidance. They experience higher rates of mental illness, criminal activity, homelessness, and unemployment.¹ They are also subject to severe financial difficulties. According to a Chapin Hall study, a significant percentage of former foster youth surveyed did not have enough money for clothing (39.9%), rent (18.6%), utilities (17.4%), or phone service (22.1%).² Having accepted responsibility for these children, the government has a unique moral obligation to ensure that foster youth aging out of the system have the opportunities and supports they need to build successful lives as adults.

In particular, research shows that this population struggles with intense and unique health care needs. Health and mental health services are vital to youth leaving foster care in New York State, many of whom struggle with mental illness and trauma recovery. One study found that youth leaving care experience a higher rate of post-traumatic stress disorder than Vietnam and Iraq veterans.³ Research in New York City indicates that in 2000, more than half of youth in foster care suffered from mental health problems.⁴

Regular access to reproductive health services and prescription coverage are also crucial for this young adult population, which is at high risk for pregnancy. In one study of current and former foster care youth, over a third (37.4%) of women, age 19 at the time of the second interview, reported being pregnant at least once in the roughly two-year time period since the first interview.⁵

Lack of health care coverage can result in higher levels of costly emergency room and inpatient care, the progression of chronic disease, and thousands of dollars of medical debt, which can be devastating for foster youth attempting to establish independent lives once they have left the foster care system.⁶ Across the country, states are recognizing the importance of providing foster youth with access to health insurance. According to a survey conducted by the American Public Human Services Association and published in 2007, seventeen states at the time of survey had enacted legislation to automatically extend Medicaid coverage under the federal Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, and five other states reported having plans to do the same.⁷

¹ Mark Courtney, "Youth Aging Out of Foster Care," Network on Transitions to Adulthood: Policy Brief, Issue 19, April 2005. Available at <http://www.transad.pop.upenn.edu/downloads/courtney--foster%20care.pdf>.

² Mark Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Gretchen Ruth, Tom Keller, Judy Havlicek, and Noel Bost, "Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19," Chapin Hall Working Paper, May 2005.

³ "Assessing the Effects of Foster Care: Mental Health Outcomes from the Casey National Alumni Study," Casey Family Programs. Available at http://www.casey.org/NR/rdonlyres/CEFBB1B6-7ED1-440D-925A-E5BAF602294D/303/casey_natl_alumni_study_mental_health.pdf.

⁴ Freundlich, "Time Running Out: Teens in Foster Care," Children's Rights, Inc., Juvenile Rights Division of the Legal Aid Society and Lawyers for Children, 2003.

⁵ Mark Courtney, et al., "Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19," Chapin Hall Working Paper, May 2005.

⁶ Benjamin Shors, "More like family: Bills aim to give hand up to teens who 'age-out' of child welfare system," THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW, January 19, 2006. Available at http://www.spokesmanreview.com/tools/story_pf.asp?ID=112086.

⁷ "Medicaid Access for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care," American Public Human Services Association, 2007. The 17 states are AZ, CA, FL, IN, IA, KS, MA, MS, NV, NJ, OK, RI, SC, SD, TX, UT, and WY. The five states with plans to do so are MD, MO, NC, NM, and WI.