

Foster care falls short, say former wards of state Churches and businesses urged to step in

By SHEILA BURKE
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Age 18 was a difficult one for Danny Sutton. After living in seven Tennessee foster homes in two years, she suddenly found herself on her own with no job, no driver's license, no real work history.

Her only reference for a prospective employer was the state Department of Children's Services, where she had been placed after being neglected by her own family at age 16.

"Trying to get a job was so hard," said Sutton, who is now 20 and living in Murfreesboro. "I wouldn't get calls back."

Yesterday, Sutton was part of a group of former Tennessee foster children who previewed a new PBS documentary, *Aging Out*, that depicts the hardships that many foster kids have when they go through a transition into the real world.

After years of supervision by government foster-care agencies, suddenly the young people find themselves on their own, often with no stable home and little preparation to care for themselves. As a result, many foster kids face homelessness, drug addiction, limited educational re-sources and even jail, experts say.

Every year, about 800 kids get too old for Tennessee's foster-care system, according to the Vanderbilt Child and Family Center. Nationwide, the figure is about 20,000.

The screening of *Aging Out* was followed by a panel discussion moderated by Tipper Gore, wife of former Vice President Al Gore, and former Juvenile Court Judge Andy Shookhoff, who now works with the Vanderbilt Child and Family Center. DCS Commissioner Viola Miller sat on the panel.

Nashville Mayor Bill Purcell was also present.

Sutton and the other former foster kids said the community could do a lot of little things to help people like them. "If you can't be a foster parent, be a mentor," said Michelle Crowley, 22, who spent about five years in foster care.

Foster children need jobs, housing, adults who care for them, and most of all understanding, they said.

Congregations and the business community can help by asking former foster kids to speak to their organizations or by providing mentoring, tutoring and housing, Shookhoof said.

Job shadowing also is very important, said Kathleen Valesky, who lived in a series of foster homes since age 3. "We all end up being social workers and nurses and teachers be-cause that's all we see," said Valesky, who is now 26.

There are many things that people take for granted that foster kids don't have, she said.

For instance, Valesky got scholarship money to go to college and live on campus. But she had no place to live when school was not in session. Valesky said she lived in a car for a while and even stayed with a drug dealer.

"I had to do some things I'm not proud of, but I had to - to survive," she said. She graduated from college in three years and now works with former foster kids at the Vanderbilt Child and Family Policy Center.

Many of the young people at yesterday's screening serve on the Tennessee Youth Advisory Council, a group of former and current foster children who work to change public policy by educating people about the realities of life as a ward of the state.

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