

ROCHELLE RILEY: Aging out would be easier for youths

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Children who grow up in, then outgrow state care face poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and sometimes jail. But if the Legislature adopts new recommendations, they might finally get some help to get off to a better start.

Foster youth would leave state care at 21 -- and would:

- Get continuous Medicaid coverage.
- Attend Michigan colleges for free.
- And use the services of a Detroit-based Housing Resource Center that matches them with affordable housing.

A task force led by state Supreme Court Justice Maura Corrigan and Department of Human Services Director Marianne Udow submitted the 21 recommendations as a way to help the 450 youths who age out of the Michigan system every year. Nationally, 16,000 young people age out of state systems.

"This is probably the most comprehensive look we have ever taken at what we do and what we can do better for our older children in foster care," Udow said. The recommendations "cover everything from basic information to how we better prepare to help our children with education, housing, jobs, health care, summer employment. We cover the gamut."

Among the most exciting is a plan for a Detroit-based Housing Resource Center, which came from a suggestion I made last June. The state will put money toward the resource center that will teach youth how to look for and rent housing.

"Take credit for it," Udow told me. "Your advocacy helped us down the path and spurred us to focus on housing."

The task force report also seeks improved mentoring, so that every foster youth has a permanent connection with at least one caring adult before he or she leaves care. It also would improve young people's access to their birth and court records -- something that would make job searches and college applications easier. Most important: All the recommendations come with a time line for completion.

When legislators return to session, their first task should be to embrace this report. Their second? To fund DHS at the level it needs to save children. The department, which has lost 4,000 employees since 1997, has 725 foster care workers.

When I look at the report, I think of Chilton Brown, who aged out two years ago and is living at Covenant House because he doesn't have a home, and Jonnie Hill, who had a toothache for months because she couldn't find a dentist who accepted Medicaid.

And I think of the children I haven't met yet who struggle from day to day, trying to live on their own before they're ready.

When legislators study the task force report, they must not lose sight of how important it is. It was mandated as a part of the DHS budget. It should serve as a blueprint, not as an excuse for not doing more.

Watch Rochelle on "Am I Right" at 8:30 p.m. Fridays on Detroit Public Television (TV-56). Contact her at rriley99@freepress.com or 313-223-4473.

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