

VOICES

Letters and Commentary from the Central Coast and beyond

SANLUISOBISPO.COM

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 14, 2006

THE TRIBUNE | B5

VIEWPOINT

How to help our local youths in foster care

By JIM ROBERTS

Last week, The Tribune and the county grand jury focused an important light on the plight of youth aging out of the foster care system.

The national and state statistics on youth exiting foster care are alarming. Within two years of exiting the foster care system, more than 50 percent experience homelessness to some degree. Less than 50 percent of foster youth graduate from high school. Only 2 percent of former foster youth complete a college degree, 35 percent end up in the criminal justice system, less than 50 percent are employed after two years and girls are six times more likely to give birth before turning 21.

Approximately 30 percent of former foster youth receive public assistance within three years, and the rate of youth diagnosed as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental illness is equivalent to war veterans. The plight of foster youth is an issue that the public needs to be aware of and offer to help these young people.

Local programs

The good news is that San Luis Obispo County is one of

the most progressive in the state for addressing the needs of foster youth. For better than a decade and a half, every foster youth 16 and older has an independent living plan developed to guide them out on their own. We are one of a handful of counties that has a Transitional Housing Placement Program specifically designed to equip foster teens with the skills they need to successfully make the jump from being a dependent of the system to self-sufficiency. The Department of Social Services ranks as a state leader in promoting permanency for foster youth, placing children with relatives and finding permanent families. Major research over the past few years, and plain common sense, tells us that foster children and youth with permanent connections are 70 percent more likely to succeed than those without them.

Transitions-Mental Health Association, the Department of Social Services and Cuesta College work collaboratively in providing an excellent Independent Living Program that provides an array of workshops, assistance and support for foster and former foster youth.

County Behavioral Health Services has recently



launched intensive services for transitional-aged youth under the Mental Health Services Act. All of our local youth serving agencies are well aware of this issue and are working to the best of their abilities to create solutions for these youth.

The agency I serve, the Family Care Network, has been providing transitional services to foster youth for nearly 19 years. Since 1999,

we have been the only Transitional Housing Placement Program provider for San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties. Through this program, foster youth are provided a semi-independent living opportunity combined with very intensive one-on-one training and support. Each youth is thoroughly assessed for life-skill and vocational abilities and is providing skill building in any life domain where the youth lacks

skills.

A key component to this program is assisting each youth in creating a network of significant permanent relationships and community linkages. Additionally, these youths receive counseling, savings incentives and household items and are provided a mentor when one is available. Since the program's inception, nearly 80 percent of participants have successfully transitioned to independence. Family Care Network also provides housing and services to nonsystem 18- to 21-year-olds with mental health needs.

Unfortunately, there is much yet to be done and many gaps to be filled. Imagine being 18 or 19 years old, with no family supports, trying to make ends meet here on the Central Coast or anywhere for that matter. Even for those who have received life-skills training, surviving is a challenge.

I recently heard that the national average age for children finally leaving home is 27. Several years ago, the Legislature passed a bill authorizing affordable housing and support services to former foster youth. San Luis Obispo County submitted a plan to the state that was subsequently approved, but the state didn't properly fund the

initiative. There is currently legislation pending to fix this, SB 1576, which needs to become law.

How to help

There are some tangible things that we as a community can do to help support youth leaving the foster care system. Here are some of them.

1. Get involved as a mentor, employer, willing landlord or a host family for a foster or former foster youth. Call 781-3535 for details.

2. Consider becoming a permanent resource family for a foster child so they don't have to be in the foster care system. Call social services 781-1705

3. Contact our local legislators and governor and ask for their support of SB 1576. Let them know that foster youth leaving the system need our help.

4. Support Proposition 1c on the November ballot. This measure will provide funding for affordable housing for former foster youth.

5. Talk about this issue with your friends and family; don't ignore the problem but propose to become part of the solution.

Jim Roberts is chief executive officer of Family Care Network Inc.