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A minus for the Plus program?

A transitional housing program for former foster care youth is threatened by the governor's budget proposal

BY AMY ASMAN

Before entering foster care at age 17, Tamera Richardson spent a large portion of her life—about 10 years—taking care of her mother and two younger siblings. Richardson struggled to ensure her siblings were clothed and fed; she cleaned the house, cooked, and made sure everyone got to school on time.

The children eventually found their way into foster care. But unfortunately for Tamera, the experience of living with a new loving and supportive family only lasted about a year. When she turned 18, she aged out of the system and was forced to separate from her brother and sister.

Homeless, Tamera started living in community parks and sleeping on friends' couches. But despite her hardships, the teenager chose to pursue a college education by enrolling at Allan Hancock College. She also started working three part-time jobs to pay for food, school, and eventually a car, all the while worrying about her siblings' whereabouts and emotional well being.

"I was afraid about [being on my own], but I was more worried about my brother and sister," she said. "I'd been taking care them since I was 7, so it was just natural for me to continue watching out for them while I pursued my own goals."

In April 2009, Tamera was given the opportunity to participate in Santa Barbara County's Transitional Housing Placement-Plus program (THP-Plus), a state-funded program that provides temporary housing and resources to foster kids who have aged out of the system. At first, Tamera said, she was hesitant to participate because she'd have to give up her three jobs.

"That was what gave me my independence, and it was the only way I was able to take care of my family," she said.

But Tamera ultimately realized what a toll the jobs were taking on her grades and decided to give it a try. That decision, she said, completely changed her life.

"I was so used to being a mom, and now I can just be a normal college student and focus on myself and my education," she explained.

Tamera is just one of approximately 1,400 Californians who receive some form of support through THP-Plus, which aims to provide newly emancipated adults with housing for up to 24 months. But the program also offers participants resources to help them become self-sufficient, including basic life skills training, educational guidance, employment

counseling, and more.

"THP-Plus offers its participants the same support that young people from intact families receive every day," said Michele Byrnes, a representative for the John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes.

"These are people who [the state] takes away from their families, the majority of whom are victims of abuse and neglect," Byrnes said. "But they're more than capable of success—they just need help."

The state of California, however, could soon be taking that support away.

In January, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger revealed his proposed budget for fiscal year 2010-11, which included the complete elimination of THP-Plus and several other human services programs if the state failed to secure an additional $6.9 billion in federal funding.

"I know many of these cuts are painful. Believe me, these are the hardest decisions a governor must make. Yet there is simply no conceivable way to avoid more cuts and more pain," Schwarzenegger said in his unveiling speech on Jan. 8.

Calls made to the governor's office and Department of Finance seeking additional comments weren't returned as of press time.

The governor's proposal is incredibly frustrating for Jim Roberts, CEO and founder of Family Care Network, Inc. The nonprofit runs THP-Plus in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties.

"It's deplorable that the state can spend $30 million on office furniture, but can't spend $30 million to promote the success of abused and neglected children," Roberts said.

THP-Plus costs approximately $36 million per year to run, according to Department of Finance records.

For Tamera, the thought that her safety net—and her future— could be taken away is "terrifying."

"If the program wasn't here, I'd have to drop out of school to provide for my family," she said.

Without the program, Tamera said, emancipated foster youth will continue to rely on government funds, such as Welfare and food stamps, to survive.

"[THP-Plus] is an investment; it's not a waste of money," she said. "It's funding for people like me who want to give back to California and make a difference."

Tamera is currently studying to become a clinical social worker. Her ultimate goal is to establish a life skills program for men and women who are released from prison.

"I want to give them confidence and the skills for success—everything THP-Plus has given me," she said.

News Editor Amy Asman volunteers with a foster child program unrelated to THP-Plus. Contact her at aasman@santamariasun.com.

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