

Santa Maria Times

Governor abandoning foster youth

Jim Roberts/Guest Commentary | Posted: Sunday, March 7, 2010 12:00 am

There was a time in the history of the Family Care Network when youth exiting the foster-care system were treated like trash. Literally, thrown away.

I remember one case involving a teenage girl in our care from Santa Clara County who aged out of the foster-care system. My staff was instructed by her county worker to pull her from the family with whom she had lived through her high school years, and return her to San Jose.

When she arrived at the Social Services office, she was loaded on a bus and driven to a homeless shelter.

At the time, this was common practice throughout California. Fortunately for this girl, her foster mom was appalled by this type of abuse and took her back into her home until she could move in with her older brother.

However, most foster youth were not so fortunate. These abused and neglected youth were routinely sent packing, with no resources, skills, connections, permanency or safety net for support.

For decades, the outcomes for former foster youth were deplorable. About 15 years ago, bureaucrats began to wake up to the fact that the system was further abusing these youth.

Not only did the system further traumatize victims of abuse and neglect, but at a huge expense. It costs taxpayers \$47,000 per year per inmate in the California prison system, in addition to the cost for the array of other public services required.

By way of contrast, a University of Washington study of former foster youth concluded, "Compared with youth who exit foster care at age 18 without support, youth with support to age 21 are two times more likely to be working toward completion of a high school diploma; three times more likely to be enrolled in college; two times less likely to experience a substance abuse problem; 20 percent less likely to be suffering a mental health disorder; 30 times more likely to be covered by health insurance; 65 percent less likely to have been arrested; and over 50 percent less likely to have been incarcerated."

In 1998, the Family Care Network was one of the first agencies in California to pursue and become licensed as a Transitional Housing Placement Provider (THPP). This program prepares foster youth exiting the system to do so with skills, resources, connections, permanency and a safety net.

In 2004, we began providing the THPP program, serving former foster youth ages 18-24. Since then, we have served nearly 400 foster or former foster youth on the Central Coast, with a 90-percent-plus success rate.

This is precisely one of the primary reasons I left my career in probation and started the Family Care Network. I wanted to implement programs that really benefit these vulnerable youth, successfully breaking the cycle of dependency on government systems through the development of individual life skills and a sense of pride and personal responsibility.

Unfortunately, if Gov. Schwarzenegger gets his way, these kids will once again be trashed. The governor has proposed eliminating transitional housing and services programs for former foster youth to balance the budget.

The state can spend \$30 million on office furniture, but can't spend \$30 million to promote the success of abused and neglected children. The state can spend \$45 million on unnecessary vehicles, while sending several thousand youth to homelessness and despair.

His proposed cut to this program represents a miniscule savings to the deficit, a mere .18 percent, while long-term, it will cost taxpayers much more. There is something horribly wrong with this set of priorities. It's time to rise up and say enough is enough.

Please join the chorus of opposition to this draconian initiative. Call, e-mail or write Gov. Schwarzenegger, Assembly

members Blakeslee and Nava, and state Sen. Maldonado, and ask them to keep funding the Transitional Housing Placement-Plus Program for former foster youth.

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