

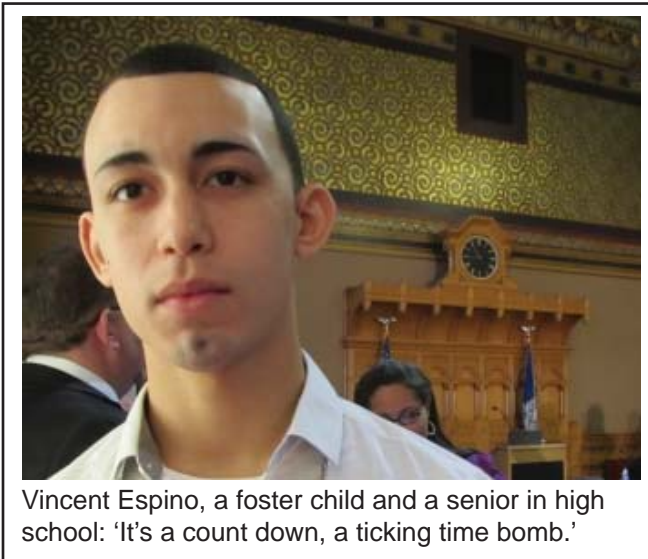
Uncertain future faces those who 'age out' of foster care

Jacqueline Rabe Thomas
December 10, 2012

Vincent Espino was removed from his home by the state's child welfare agency almost five years ago. He has bounced around to four different foster homes and a group home since then. He has never paid rent or a bill himself. He has to ask his social worker when he needs money for things like a yearbook or a class field trip.

And unless this teen from Waterbury -- and dozens of other foster children like him -- go to college or another educational training program when they turn 18 or leave high school, they may be on their own.

"It's frightening to think that the little support you do have may be going away. It's a count down, a ticking time bomb," Espino said. He was taking a break at a daylong event at the state Capitol explaining what happens when foster children turn 18.



Vincent Espino, a foster child and a senior in high school: 'It's a count down, a ticking time bomb.'

Department of Children and Families Commissioner Joette Katz is hoping to change the reality that many foster children face as they reach the age of legal adulthood.

Katz is moving ahead with plans to apply for federal reimbursements that will pick up some additional costs of running her agency that has 4,300 children in her custody on any given day.

But the money comes with significant strings attached. The agency must keep children in its care until they turn 21 if they are working 80 hours a month, in college or another education program, or are disabled.

"Connecticut does not serve all youth who are eligible to remain in foster care under [the law]," reads a handout from Voices for Children given to those who attended their event at the Capitol. "Connecticut has an opportunity to join a national movement and expand foster its foster care to youth until their 21st birthdays."

Katz was non-committal to whether she plans to ensure services are provided to all these young people, but did say that a wavier request on how the state is currently reimbursed for federal funding "will be done by 2014."

Life after 18 years old

Last year, 526 foster children turned 18. Some of these formerly abused and/or neglected children went on to college or another educational program and continue receiving help from DCF for tuition and housing.

But many did not. In fact, 337 foster children "aged out" of DCF care last year with no permanent placement either because they turned 18 or dropped out or graduated from an educational program at an older age. "That's shameful. We are going to do something about it," Katz said.

About 15 percent of children who leave DCF care each year do so because they "age out" of the system, one of the highest rates in the country, according to Fostering Connections, a non-partisan think tank on child-welfare agencies. This distinction has followed the state for years.

Several of the foster children who attended Thursday's event at the Capitol, co-sponsored by the Center for Children's Advocacy, said some of their friends were the ones who "aged out." "I won't be making that mistake," said Melquon Bridger, a 17-year old foster child living in Bridgeport who has already gotten into the Julliard School for dance and arts.

While DCF's policies require children to be in school full-time -- and the agency's implementation of that rule last year stirred unrest among child advocates -- officials Thursday insist many more children than those just enrolled in full-time programs are getting help.

"We don't kick kids out at 18," Katz said, noting that exceptions are routinely awarded. DCF officials report that about 500 foster children over 18 currently receive help with college or other education expenses, includ-



DCF Commissioner Joette Katz: 'That's shameful. We are going to do something about it.'

ing many who attend part time.

"DCF is increasingly flexible as long as they're in school" or some type of educational program, said Sarah Eagan, a lawyer with the Center for Children's Advocacy. But, she said, "They're not all making it to 21."

A national study by the University of Chicago on the outcomes of children leaving foster care is sobering. There are high rates of homelessness, young parenthood or incarceration. Researchers followed foster children in Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois in the years after they turned 18. Only 2 percent would have a college degree by the time they reached 21 years of age.

DCF recognizes that many of their children will not make it in college or another educational program the first time, and recently instituted a re-entry policy that allows former foster children to come back into care and go back to school. "If the child is saying 'I want you. I need your help.' We are their parent and parents don't say, 'We're done, no,'" said Ken Mysogland, DCF's director of foster and adoption services. But the child does have to agree to fulfill certain conditions -- laid out in a transition plan -- that includes things like going to school or receiving mental health services or career training.

But Eagan said the re-entry program is little used. "It's great it's there, but it's hard to navigate so you know how to get help," she said. Young people who want to apply for re-entry must call the agency's 24-hour hotline, fill out and submit an application that is sent to them, then wait to hear back.

Just last week a Hartford teen who recently "aged out" of care walked into Eagan's office hoping her office would have better luck getting her back into DCF. "We're going to help her," said Eagan, who is taking on the case at no charge.

Foster children get free lawyers to help them get services and advocate for their best interests, but those advocates are no longer guaranteed when they turn 18. For years, DCF offered children a one-year grace period after they turned 18 -- known as the "gap year" -- to figure out their plans and get situated in the real world.

"That needs to come back," Dezerea Pepin, told the commissioner during the forum Thursday. Pepin, a 17-year old from Norwich, is joining the National Guard when she graduates high school. Katz said she is considering that possibility.

Katz, who in 2011 took over the troubled state agency that has been overseen by a federal judge for decades, said the agency now has several lifeskills and other programs available to help better prepare older children leaving care.

The agency also is gearing up to launch "Permanency and Child and Family Teams" which will facilitate meetings between parents, family members, professionals and interested community members to team up and figure out what is best for the child approaching 18 years old. The agency also plans on having staff dedicated to maintaining relationships so children don't leave care with no one. That team is set to begin meeting with older youth this spring.

New federal pot of money?

Katz's promise to apply for a waiver by 2014 could play a small role in helping the state close its projected \$1.2 billion deficit for the upcoming fiscal year that ends June 30, 2014. Her proposal is estimated to bring in \$17 million in additional federal funding and stop the agency from losing millions more in federal reimbursements.

Over the last five years, DCF has reduced the number of children in state custody by 20 percent. This has won approval from child advocates, who prefer keeping families intact whenever possible and providing the necessary services for them in the community.

But it's meant a major decline in federal funding -- an \$18 million reduction between fiscal 2011 and 2012 alone -- since the state is only reimbursed for children in its custody.

It is unclear how much expanding services to more foster children after they turn 18 will cost. State officials from California and Pennsylvania's child welfare agency's told audience members in Connecticut last week that doing so was cost neutral, since it opened the door for them to be reimbursed for so many other things.

Earlier this year, an official from the U.S. Administration for Children and Families urged Katz to apply immediately. Katz said during an interview this week she has every intention of applying, but wouldn't say if it meant expanding care to more children that "age out." The land a waiver, the department has a handful of choices of what reforms to pursue.

In a proposal made to Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's budget office in September, she recommended the state seek federal reimbursements for children over 18, for placing more children with relatives and more support for social workers. The state spends at least \$7 million for college expenses alone for those in college and other education programs.

"We will recover the money for the kids in that pipeline," she said.