

Hearing focuses on how wards leave foster care

Written by Amanda Woita
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LINCOLN—With the overhaul of Nebraska's foster care system, most of the attention has focused on how children enter the system. But a legislative hearing Thursday refocused on how wards of the state leave foster care.

Sen. Amanda McGill of Lincoln, along with representatives from Nebraska Appleseed and Project Everlast, a Nebraska youth advocacy group, held a press conference Thursday afternoon to discuss what happens when a child ages out of the foster care system at 19 or is discharged to live independently at a younger age.

The Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee discussed an interim study on the issue later in the afternoon.

Currently, the Former Ward program offers support for these kids after they turn 19 and until they turn 21. However, according to a survey by Nebraska Appleseed, of the roughly 300 young adults leaving the foster care system each year, 35 percent receive services from this voluntary program. But only 27 of the former state wards received assistance for the full two years.

This transition into adulthood also includes health care and continuing education past high school. About 57 percent of those 300 youths lose their Medicaid coverage after aging out of the system, according to Appleseed's survey.

Amy West, a representative from Appleseed, said in order to qualify for the Former Ward program, a young adult has to sign up before exiting the system, attend college directly after graduating from high school, work 80 hours a month or have job training unless he or she has a medical condition that would prevent employment.

During the press conference, John Thompson, a former foster care child who aged out four weeks ago, described his experiences. He said he didn't know about the Former Ward program

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until after he turned 19, which makes him ineligible for assistance.

“College is often a dream for people who don’t have the funding,” Thompson said. Thompson added that he has joined the military.

The press conference and the hearing examined proposed changes to the back-door part of the foster care system. Changes in federal law in recent years, including federal matching funds, give states more flexibility on how they can help youths leaving foster care, West said.

Sarah Helvey, director of the child welfare program at Appleseed, said these new services would extend Medicaid for the former wards and provide a monthly stipend for housing. Additionally, inclusion in the program would be less restrictive, meaning someone leaving the foster care system wouldn’t have to start college right away or they could wait to receive services. That would be especially helpful for those who are discharged at the ages of 16, 17 and 18 and are not ready to start college.

Helvey added that those who are a part of the proposed new system also would receive young adult services to continue introducing them into the adult world, including things like lessons on how to manage their own money.

According to McGill, the cost of the new service would be \$2 million to \$3 million a year.

Amy Peters, a former foster child and current representative for Project Everlast, added that young adults leaving the foster system are at a higher risk of going back into welfare or of entering the criminal justice system.

“Most parents don’t stop investing in their kids past 18,” Peters said, “The state shouldn’t either.”

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