

Children And Families

Study Finds Foster Care Challenges Continue Into Adulthood

by Mary Bissell

(NAPSA)—Mary Anne Herrick is no stranger to success. After finishing her master's degree, this 27-year-old now runs the Governor's Scholarship for Foster Youth at the Washington Education Foundation. But this ambitious young woman is equally proud of her credentials from another institution, foster care, where she spent seven years.

While Mary is a foster care success story, a new study by Casey Family Programs and the Harvard Medical School finds that not all former foster children fare as well.

Based on an extensive review of the cases of 659 adults—ages 20-33—who had been in foster care in Washington and Oregon, researchers found that a startling one-half of the former foster youth reported one or more mental health disorders, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at twice the rate of U.S. war veterans.

In an economy where a high school diploma is still a cornerstone of economic success, study participants finished high school at rates similar to the general population, but almost 30 percent received Graduation Equivalency Diplomas (GEDs), an academic path that often translates into lower salaries and earning potential.

And because most of the 20,000 young adults who “age out” of foster care every year when they turn 18 are no longer eligible for the financial support foster care provides, nearly a quarter of the foster care alumni surveyed experienced homelessness after leaving care, one-third reported incomes at or below the poverty level, and one-third were without health insurance.

“As a country, we are not doing right by these children,” says Ruth Massinga, President and CEO of the Seattle-based Casey Family Programs, an organization dedicated to improving the lives of children in foster care. “Growing up just shouldn't be this hard.”



Mary Anne Herrick, with the Washington Education Foundation, and a former foster youth, speaks to the press about the need for mental health services for youth in foster care. Casey Family Programs President & CEO Ruth Massinga looks on.

In addition to its findings on foster care alumni outcomes, the researchers also examined those services that, if consistently provided, could improve the prospects for future foster youth. Recommendations included measures to reduce the number of placement and school changes while in care, provide adequate financial support for young people as they leave care, and remove barriers to the proper diagnosis and treatment of mental health conditions.

With the help of these supports, Mary Anne Herrick sees only the endless possibilities for the foster youth she now serves. “We're an incredibly resilient group that has already overcome so much,” she says, “and we have amazing potential to help change the system.”

Casey Family Programs' mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately to prevent the need for—foster care. Established by United Parcel Service founder Jim Casey, the Seattle-based national operating foundation has served children, youth, and families in the child welfare system since 1966.

To learn more, visit www.casey.org.