

# LOST IN TRANSITION

## A Foster Youth Confronts Her Emancipation

by YOLANDA ANYON and JENNIFER KRASNER,  
with special contributions from BRYTTENI

In a photograph Brytteni has of her graduation from McClymonds High School in West Oakland, she is surrounded by friends and an assortment of balloons and flowers. Smiling, with tears in her eyes, Brytteni stood out from the crowd as a beauty in her high-heeled shoes, bright makeup, perfectly pressed hair, colorful acrylic nails and an almost defiant look in her almond-shaped eyes. Reflecting on that day, she remembers somberly, "I was so close to not making it." Then with a youthful bravado, she reveals what she was actually thinking, "I don't have to go to school no more, I'm going to sleep 'till two!"

This carefree vision of life after high school was nothing like the reality of poverty and the possibility of homelessness that Brytteni later confronted. As a young woman in the foster care system, Brytteni's high school graduation marked her independence, both financially and emotionally, from her legal guardian, the State of California. Brytteni acknowledged that this rite of passage was mostly symbolic. "To me, it was different than for some [youth in foster care] who are living in a group home or start foster care when they are nine or 10," she says. "That day [of emancipation], your life changes – you have to move out, you had a social worker. But for me, I had already had my own apartment, I hadn't seen my social worker in three or four months. So as far as I was concerned, I was like, 'I'm already emancipated.'" On that day, Brytteni became one of the 4,000 youth who emancipate from the system every year often unprepared for the growing responsibilities and financial independence that comes with adulthood.

It is true that Brytteni had been surviving on her own for years. Her involvement with the child welfare system began in tenth grade, when she sought the help of a psychiatrist to manage the trauma she was experiencing at home. Without understanding the consequences of her actions, Brytteni told the psychiatrist that her mother was emotionally abusive and neglectful. "My mother would not allow me to be a kid in her

house. She had these rules for me especially [compared to my brothers]," she says. Her mother also failed to protect her from sexual and physical harm at the hands of other family members and friends. By law, the psychiatrist had to report this abuse to Child Protective Services, setting in motion a chain of events that led to Brytteni's removal from her mother's home. Over the next three years, she bounced between four different placements, ultimately landing in an apartment on her grandmother's property.

While the purpose of foster care is to protect children from neglect or abuse, the state's child welfare agencies are required to do very little to ensure that those who emancipate from the system are prepared for life on their own. In fact, once a foster care youth turns eighteen or graduates high school, the state is not responsible for keeping track of what happens to them. The only information we have on former foster youth is for those who later receive welfare assistance or get into trouble, which is statistically often the case. According to the California Department of Social Services, approximately 50 percent of young women who were once in foster care end up on welfare within six years of emancipation, compared to only six percent of all females between the ages of 19 and 29. The California Legislature also estimates that over 70 percent of all State Penitentiary inmates have spent some time in the child welfare system. Beyond their involvement with the criminal justice or welfare system, young people who emancipate from foster care experience multiple challenges, including homelessness, mental health problems, and a limited education.

To prevent such problems in early adulthood, national studies say that most biological parents provide their children with emotional and financial support until they turn 26. Starting in the 1980s, researchers, advocates and policy makers argued that states should be expected to do the same for former foster care youth. In response, congress passed the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act in 1999, which provides states with funding

to create Independent Living Skills Programs (ILSP) for "transition age" foster youth between 16 and 21 years old. Federal and state law mandates that ILSP programs provide emancipated youth with access to financial support, housing, counseling, employment, education, and health care services to supplement their own efforts to achieve self-sufficiency. In Brytteni's case, after months of working in a series of dead-end jobs after high school, she was determined to pursue her goal of going to college to become a nurse. From ILSP, she has received \$500 to help pay for books and a \$500 scholarship for winning an essay contest. The state covers her tuition at community college. All together, this support is worth only \$1,250, barely covering two months rent for a studio apartment in the Bay Area. Luckily, her grandmother agreed to continue renting her apartment for \$500 a month, which Brytteni splits with her boyfriend. On her own, Brytteni found a part-time job as a cocktail waitress, allowing her to attend classes during the day. Still, at the end of the month, she's never quite sure how she's going to pay all of her bills.

According to Jeff Sloan, Program Manager at Beyond Emancipation, a non-profit organization that serves emancipated youth in the county where Brytteni lives, many youth do not receive the services they need, in part because they never find out about them. "Alameda is consistent with the rest of California in that we are servicing between 20 and 25 percent of youth who are eligible," says Sloan. "We are finding that a lot of these youth in group homes and foster homes aren't getting the information they need, so they emancipate without stable housing, a job lined up, or understand[ing] how to balance a check book. And once youth have emancipated, it is very difficult to track them." Shira Andron, First Foundation Program Manager at First Place for Youth, a provider of transitional housing programs for foster youth, agrees. "Independent Living Skills Programs are preparing youth for transitioning out of care, but we need to make sure that we're talking to kids early and connecting more youth to ILSP to make sure they are on track to meet their goals and connected to related resources," she says. Without these early, strong connections, the vast majority of former foster care youth do not know about these programs and they do not receive services.

In addition to challenges with outreach, state and federal governments do not fund programs for emancipating youth at a level that meets existing demand. In the case of transitional housing, the Children's Advocacy Institute estimates that California only funds enough units to serve two percent of the eligible emancipated youth population. Christy Saxton, the My First Place Program Manager at First Place for Youth, reports that their program for emancipated youth always has "a full waiting list." Sloan says that more funding is warranted because there is evidence that these programs are effective, "Agencies are functioning on a limited budget, even though there is research that demonstrates our youth tend to avoid incarceration at greater rate than those who don't utilize ILSP and our services. Secure housing and training and enrollment in school invariably prevents them from ending up on the streets."

Since Brytteni received only minimal support from ILSP, she attributes her personal success in part to relationships she had with consistent and caring adults while she was in foster care. These individuals did not include social workers or foster parents; they were teachers and youth workers Brytteni met through school. "I had these surrogate mothers, different ones over time. As I've evolved, I've depended on people for different reasons, whatever phase I'm going on. I feel like I have an extended family." Now Brytteni says she has a loving relationship with her boyfriend and his family helps her enjoy life despite her struggles to stay afloat. "Lawrence made a big difference. Now I have someone very similar to me who can understand situations that I'm going through. We are a little family, we talk about that all the time." Professionals and researchers agree that a permanent connection to an adult mentor or family member, in combination with access to concrete services like transitional housing, are the two most significant factors that contribute to transition-age youths' success as an adult.



New legislation presented by California State Senator Carol Migden could alleviate some of the problems facing emancipated youth if it receives funding by June. Her bill, the "Transition Guardian Plan," would require the state to provide former foster youth with mentoring, support services and a monthly stipend as long as they are following a plan for self-sufficiency that they have developed with the court. The bill is modeled after the very successful Guardian Scholars, which has had a 65-75 percent success rate supporting former foster youth in graduating from college. Although the program would be expensive, and some are concerned about the potential exploitation that could arise from paying mentors, it will save the state hundreds of millions of dollars in the long-term if it keeps former foster youth out of prison and off welfare. Analysis from the Children's Advocacy Institute shows that for every dollar spent on the Transition Guardian Plan, the state could save two dollars in welfare and prison spending. When asked how the foster care system could better support emancipated youth, Brytteni says that youth need mentors, financial assistance, and scholarships for college or a vocational training program. If Congress approves Senator Migden's legislation, Brytteni, and thousands of other youth like her, might get just that.

#### ETHSIX ARTICLE STATISTICS

**Placements:** In California 73% of children experience 3-5 foster care placements in their first 3 years of care.

**Emancipation:** In 2004, 4,255 children emancipated from Foster Care in California (Child Welfare Service Reports for California (2005).

**Financial Assistance:** The average amount parents pay to assist their children post-18 is \$38,340 (2001 dollars, the figure is \$42,271 in 2005 dollars and \$44,553 in 2007 dollarsBahney, A. (April 20, 2006).

**Currently California provides emancipated foster youth with only 5% of this amount in programs and assistance .**

**College Completion:** 1-5% of foster youth enrolled ever graduate college.

**Pregnancy Rates:** Several studies reveal that girls who emancipate from foster care are far more likely (approximately 3x) than their non-foster youth peers to have a child be 19.

**Welfare Use:** Approximately 50% of females in the foster care system receive AFDC/TANF Medi CAL within 1-6 years of emancipation.

**Justice System:** Over 70% of all State Penitentiary inmates have spent some time in the foster care system (May 12 2006 Select Committee Hearing of the California Legislature)