

Teens In Foster Care



All They Need Is Love

In our August issue, The Church Guide exposed a beast of a problem right here in Hampton Roads – Teen Homelessness. The feature gave recognition to the few ministries locally who were tackling this problem and offering assistance to the 2,500-3,000 teens living on the streets locally. We also provided a number of ways that the Church could become involved. One of the factors contributing to the number of young homeless people was the “aging out” of teens from the foster care system. This is part two of this series as we look at foster care for teens.

Imagine being a child and one morning being awakened by strangers (social service workers and police) who take you away from your home.

You have no idea where you are going or if you will see your mother or your brothers or sisters ever again. You are brought to live with people you don't know.

Are you supposed to call these people your mom and dad now?

What about your friends. Will you ever see them again? Are you going to have to go to a new school?

Over 500,000 kids suffer this uprooting experience every year to spend time in foster care. There are more than 7,000 foster children living in Virginia, with 2,000 of them right here in Hampton Roads.

Abuse and neglect are the main reasons children enter foster care. Some will return to their families. Others will be adopted. The rest will remain in the foster care system.

Foster care children often enter the system having suffered from physical or sexual abuse, neglect, and/or abandonment. Once in the system, they can face multiple placements, and separation from biological siblings.

Without a permanent home structure, they may move from one family to another, often attending two, three, or as many as five different schools in a short period of time, leaving behind old friends, as well as familiar bonds for support.

Research evidence suggests that frequent school transfers and disruptions in the learning process can take a toll on a

student's learning development. That is why so many foster care children have higher instances of below grade level performance in reading and math, and many times are so behind they are required to repeat a grade.

Without permanence, children in foster care are three to six times more likely than other children to have emotional, behavioral, and developmental problems. These difficulties include depression, problems in school, and impaired social relationships.

Children, especially when young, have limited life experiences on which to establish their sense of self. Furthermore, their sense of time focuses primarily on the present, the here-and-now. They don't understand “temporary” versus “permanent.” Any disruption in their lives can be stressful. The younger the child and the more extended the period of uncertainty or separation, the more detrimental it will be to the child's well being.

Thousands of foster teens “age out” of the system every year before ever being placed into a permanent home. Virginia leads the nation in that regard, with 21% of the state's foster children leaving their system without homes (2004 the latest year for figures).

Adjusting to the World that Awaits Them

The Foster Care system fails to prepare teens for what's ahead once they “age out” of the system. It's like all of a sudden you are 18, and the system isn't responsible for you anymore. You're on your own, totally unprepared for the world of independent living.

Approximately 25,000 teens age out of the system every year.

Most leave the system without jobs, stable homes, savings, or people (a family) they can fall back on.

Quite often the foster teens return home hopeful that everything will work out. They have no back up plan. Unfortunately, much to often the find themselves back on the streets.

No young adult should be allowed to leave foster care without a place to live and a way to support themselves. They need to receive independent living classes, job training and coaching on how to hold down a job, skills in budgeting money, and counseling for developing relationships with adults.

Teens leaving the system have little or no money, so they need funds for security deposits, rent, utilities, phones, furnishings. Plus they need weekly allowances for food.

Many former foster teens become depressed and struggle with loneliness as they attempt to become self-sufficient. While other teens outside of the system are eager to leave home at this point, their parents often serve as a safety net in times of financial or emotional need. Foster teens don't have this luxury and have no support to fall back on.

Without a family and no support from the government, less than 50 percent of aged-out youth graduate from high school. A quarter become homeless within the next two to four years. About one-quarter of the men end up incarcerated. Sadly, only 2 percent will go on to earn a college degree.

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP A FOSTER TEEN

So how do we as Christians stop the cycle. Children and youth in foster care are capable of overcoming the repercussions of previous neglect and/or abuse. Across the country, people are serving as foster parents, relative caregivers, mentors, adoptive parents, and supportive volunteers.

No matter how much time you have to give, you have the power to do something positive that will change a lifetime for a teen in foster care.

Becoming Foster Parents

Opening your home to children who need a temporary place to stay is an act of love. Many children are in the foster care system because of abandonment, neglect, and abuse, and are in desperate need of a loving, temporary, safe, and supportive environment in which to stay. They become partners in the child's support, treatment and care programs. They provide the nurturing, advocacy, and love that the child is so desperately in need.

To become a foster parent, the process involves assessment, training, and licensing. The first step is to figure out if you are right for foster parenting.

There is more to being a foster parent than providing a teen a place to stay and food to eat. It's about giving a teen a sanctuary during an unstable, unsure time in their life. Besides the internal hormonal emotional changes taking place in their lives, their external security and stability is emotionally challenging their being also.

If you are thinking about becoming a foster parent, you will need to be able to:

- Care for a child from a difficult background
- Be confident in your parenting skills
- Clearly define limits and discipline with understanding
- Tolerate the ups and downs of foster parenting
- Give a child a sense of belonging during the temporary stay
- Accept guidance from a trained social worker
- Present a positive attitude toward a foster child's parents
- Love a child knowing they may not easily love you back, and then let them go.

Financial assistance is available to foster families, but proof that the needs of foster parenting can be met without this assistance is required. It should be more about providing a loving, safe home environment than about the money. Foster parenting is not a job.

If you are considering becoming a foster parent, here is a quote from the Bair Foundation. “God does not call the equipped, rather he equips those He calls. To get started on the path to foster parenting, we encourage you to contact one of the following Christian ministries:

The Bair Foundation

Providing Foster Parent training, support, scholarship funds, medical care, and more. Contact Khalilah Shabazz, Program Supervisor. (757) 424-2861. 2006 Old Greenbrier Road, Suite #3, Chesapeake, VA 23320. www.bair.org.

United Methodist Family Services

Seeking Foster Parents for teens. Offering structured therapeutic support and training. Contact Cheryl Simmons (757) 424-2861 x 117. 815 Baker Rd., Virginia Beach, VA 23462. www.umfs.org

Adopt a Teen

Although most people think about babies when they are considering adoption, there are many older children, including teens, who are waiting to become part of a family. Most of them have been in the foster care system for a considerable length of time; many have faced multiple moves and psychological challenges.

It is never too late for a teen to join a loving family. Teens need stability, a sense of belonging, and opportunities to develop and grow. These things are all far more likely if they are part of a loving family.

If you feel called to adopt, here are some local Christian agencies ready to help you:

Bethany Christian Services

Presently looking for families to adopt African American and multi-cultural children. Contact (757) 499-9367. 287 Independence Blvd., Suite 241, Virginia Beach, VA 23462. www.bethany.org/virginiaebach

Catholic Charities of Eastern Virginia

Numerous programs for those considering adoption. FMI: On the southside (757) 533-5217 or 757-484-0703 on the Peninsula and Williamsburg (757) 875-0060

United Methodist Family Services

Seeking Foster Parents for teens. Offering structured therapeutic support and training. Contact Sheryll Green (757) 490-9791. 815 Baker Rd., Virginia Beach, VA 23462. www.umfs.org



Become a Mentor

Once foster teens have left the system and are on their own, they need a caring and loving adult to watch over them. They need someone who will stick with them through their ups and downs.

Unlike other teens, foster teens don't have someone they can go to when they

a bad breakup, or fail an exam. They have no one to support them through their first job interview, their first adult relationship, and their first time living on their own.

A strong mentor can make a huge difference in the life of a foster teen. Having someone who holds high expectations for them and encourages them to see a better life for themselves.

Foster teens may have had a history of rotating paternal guidance in their life. That needs to be broken. What they need a parental figure – a mentor – who will be there for them, when they need it. Someone they know they can go to, confide in, and receive unconditional support. They need stability, support and encouragement.



Seniors Volunteer as Foster Grandparents

Senior volunteers can play an important role in mentoring foster youth, applying their unique assets and skills. Foster Grandparents, in particular, may be particularly suited to serve as members to this population.

Foster grandparents can offer adequate time to focus on the needs of youth in order to mentor and offer support. Foster grandparents typically have flexible schedules that increase their availability to young people and are more able to get involved in events that happen during work hours, such as court appearances, school events, doctor visits, and clinical services.

Foster grandparents have a wealth of knowledge and wisdom that they can share with a young person. They can give the love and care that the young person is seeking. They can offer perspective, a sense of history, and a level of understanding about some issues that a younger mentor may not.

Because foster grandparents have raised and nurtured several generations in their own families, they bring considerable knowledge about tending to a child's needs. Quite often they have been active in their communities or church, and have a wealth of relationships and connections to offer foster youth.

Provide Equal Opportunities in Education

Sometimes, tangible items can have a tremendous impact on a young life.

Foster youth often lack the funds to pay for after-school computer classes, musical instruments or art supplies. They also lack items that most of us would consider basics, such as school backpacks, books, and computers.

Many foster care teens desire to go to college, but they don't have the resources to go. The foster systems also does little to build up their self-esteem and expectations to better themselves.

The church and the community can change all that.

They can create a foster scholarship fund. Funds can also be set up to help pay the living expenses of studying foster teens. The church and community can donate school supplies, give bookstore gift certificates to the college they might be attending. Provide tutoring services for those teens who need to develop their learning skills and study habits for college.

Locally the **Together We Can Foundation** is offering such help to foster teens. They provide higher education and vocational training opportunities for teens leaving foster care in order to better prepare them so that they might succeed in adulthood. FMI: contact tcrockett@twcfoundation.org or visit www.twcfoundation.org. 5101 Cleveland Street, Suite 306, Virginia Beach.

The state of Virginia's **Education and Training Vouchers (ETV)** program assists eligible foster care and adopted youth with post-secondary education and training expenses. www.dss.virginia.gov/family/fc.

Provide Job Training

It is difficult for aged-out foster teens to secure stable work. They normally have few job skills. They need training on how to present oneself during job interviews, and they need to learn the skills or receive the education needed to secure a job.

Christian business owners might consider employing foster youth – giving them a chance, giving them experience for positive change. By training them for successful careers, employers provide foster youth with a critical start toward a lifetime of self-sufficiency.



Other Ways to Help Foster Teens

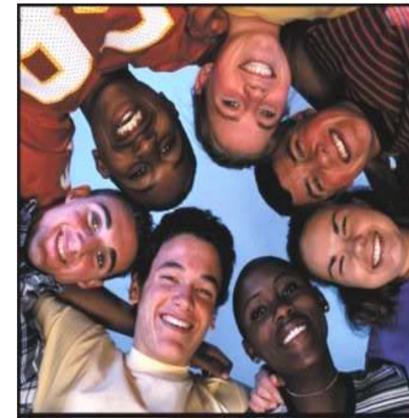
Few “aged out” foster teens have a car of their own. They have no way to get to a job, to get to a college, or to get to a job interview. Churches, ministries and caring organizations should consider offering “aged out” teens rides to medical appointments and places that public transportation doesn't take them. Perhaps they can go all out and donate a used, reliable car and the funds to take care of it.

Most of the time when a teen leaves the system, they leave with only a suitcase or two

of clothing and personal items. They may not have business attire needed for a job interview, or to wear should they get a job. The Church Guide has a listing of ministries that could provide such clothing, but we need to encourage other ministries to get involved.

Consider donating household items, furniture, cookwear, etc. Put together “care packages” to help them transition into their new independence.

Doctors, dentists, resume writers, consider donating your time to help these teens so desperately in need. If you own a store or a restaurant, donate gift cards. If you're a banker, help them set up a checking and savings account. Whatever your talents, God wants you to use them to make a difference in a young person's life.



The Bottom Line

What foster kids need, regardless of their age, is to be loved. They need a sense of belonging. They need the safety and security of a place and a “family” to come home to. Whether it is their biological family, their foster care family, or their adoptive family, the bottom line is that family is where you get belonging and values and confidence and guideposts for all lifelong decisions.

Jesus said in Luke 9:48, “Whoever welcomes this child, welcomes me.” Children are precious to the Father. Christians and churches need to do more. The Church Guide encourages you to make a difference in the life of a young person leaving (or in) foster care. Provide scholarships, provides celebration packs for those aging out of the system, provide training, job assistance, transportation. As individuals we should consider “has God blessed us to be a blessing to others.” Should we become foster parents. Should we consider adoption. Is there a job we can offer a teen leaving the system. If we are seniors, can we offer our love and attention to wanting teens who not only don't have parents but don't have grand parents in their lives either. Can we be mentor?

The Church can make a difference. If you bring a smile to a child's face, you bring a smile to the Father.