

Hays: Mentoring is key for foster kids aging out of the system

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By Michelle Hays - Special to the American-Statesman

Each year in the United States roughly 25,000 children ages 18 and older age out of the foster care system that sustains approximately 400,000 children yearly.

Soon, Davion Only will be part of the statistics. You may remember his story. It went viral.

The Florida teen stood in front of his church congregation last year pleading for someone to adopt him. He received more than 10,000 inquires from around the world. This young man, who had lived in more than 15 foster homes since his birth, finally found a family who wanted him.

Recently, Davion was in the news again. His planned adoption with his new family did not happen, and he returned to a group foster home. One has to wonder if his adoption would have been successful had he had a caring adult to mentor him during his time in foster care.

Over the past three years, nearly 75,000 foster children have aged out of the system without a mentor while bills sit in House and Senate subcommittees.

In Texas alone, there are more than 30,000 children in a foster care system that is in need of redesign. But there is stalled federal legislation that could help foster children with mentors.

In 2011, U.S. Rep. Karen Bass of California and Sen. Mary Landrieu of Louisiana introduced identical bills. Each bill “aims to connect foster youth with caring and supportive mentors.” They would provide funding through grants for state and private community agencies to develop and expand mentoring programs for children in foster care.

Landrieu’s bill would authorize \$15 million to establish statewide foster care mentoring programs, provide \$4 million to begin a national foster care awareness campaign and provide mentors to foster children up to \$10,000 in federal student loan forgiveness.

Statistics show that youth who have been mentored are 45 percent less likely to do drugs, while 59 percent achieve increased academic performance and 73 percent overall reach higher goals.

Evidence demonstrates that creating interdependence for foster children through mentor relationships is a move in the right direction. As youth become empowered through “social support” and “relational networks,” they profit intangibly and tangibly.

Landrieu said, “These youth, who have been moved from school to school and from home to home, lack stability and permanency and can learn to thrive when someone gives the energy and time to

show that they care. It is our responsibility to ensure that these youth have the opportunity to build lasting relationships with adult role models.”

According to the research, those aging out often struggle with independence and freedom. Essentially, they are forced out of the system with little or no financial or relational support or adequate preparation for being self-sufficient. They are on their own.

The lack of meaningful social support and a network of relationships often lead to poor outcomes. Studies show these children simply do not have the tools or skills to navigate their future as they end up homeless and unemployed and with unplanned pregnancies, low education levels, issues with the legal system, substance abuse and mental health issues.

The dysfunction felt during their tumultuous childhood creates a major hurdle for them to overcome. Rarely have they built or learned how to foster healthy and trusted relationships with others, especially adults.

Larry Wright, the former CEO and president of the National Mentoring Partnership, has said, “This legislation has the potential to reach those youth who might otherwise fall through the cracks and turn a potentially tragic situation into a productive and meaningful future.”

As the sage proverb says, “It takes a village to raise a child.” In this case, investing in a mentoring “village” of caring adults can positively position foster care youth to experience freedom and independence with confidence.

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