

By CJ Jones

Jones, 23, is a former foster youth and member of Oregon Foster Youth Connection. She grew up in Molalla and resides in Multnomah County.

For many people, preparing for adulthood can be stressful and confusing. It's hard enough to figure out how to be yourself — let alone maintaining relationships, being a good student, passing a driver's test and deciding what kind of future you want. Now imagine you're a youth transitioning out of foster care. Once you leave, your support systems suddenly disappear, and you're on your own.

As someone who spent 10 years in foster care, I know what that's like. That's why I'm working with other foster youth to advocate for HB 4120, which increases funding for the Independent Living Program, an important resource for youth transitioning out of foster care. The program teaches things that foster youth don't learn from high school, foster parents or even caseworkers. Some of these skills include how to make a doctor's appointment, change a tire, take responsibility and more. Youth can meet with a skills trainer one-on-one to work on personal goals and also learn skills in a group setting.

Growing up in care makes it extremely hard to build a sense of community. Like many foster youth, I had multiple placements and moved a lot. Many foster youth exit care without the kinds of support systems other young people might have, which makes you feel isolated, scared and insecure about your future.

But I was lucky. While transitioning out of care, the Independent Living Program taught me how to take becoming an adult very seriously while also building a sense of community with other youth in care. The program not only taught me what resources were available, but how to access them. My skills trainer and mentor in the program helped me research Job Corps, the federal program offering career and technical education; seek housing assistance and apply for federal student aid. These things enabled me to graduate high school, confidently live on my own and continue my education.

During my time in the program, I never felt alone or as if no one could relate. This made me feel encouraged, motivated and strong — emotionally and mentally. My mentor made me feel incredibly heard and understood. That gave me confidence to take on a leadership role in my own life. Before I left the program, my mentor connected me to Oregon Foster Youth Connection so I could continue advocating for things I was passionate about. This has given me another sense of community where I feel strong, independent and proud to be a part of positive change.

One positive thing we can do now is pass HB 4120. In 2016, 71% of young people who left foster care in Oregon "aged out" without being reunited or connected to a family. By stabilizing transition services for foster youth, Oregon can help more youth create supportive communities and identify safe and effective resources. HB 4120 will increase the likelihood of youth transitioning into adulthood with confidence and an understanding of how to achieve their goals.

Both the Independent Living Program and Oregon Foster Youth Connection have helped me see that I matter and so does the change I can make. By passing HB 4120, we can help other youth feel this sense of empowerment and control over their futures.