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State Slips Put Teens on Street

31 Oct 2004

By Michelle Roberts

At least a third of street kids living in downtown Portland are current or former foster-care children who have been "dumped" by the state, according to a Portland Citizens Crime Commission report that will be released next month.

According to data collected by the commission, of the nearly 1,000 teens who receive services from city homeless youth agencies each year, at least 300 either left or were abandoned by the state foster care system without jobs, stable homes or people they could count on. Without resources, they must fend for themselves. Social service agencies estimate that about 2,000 homeless teens and young adults live in the metropolitan area. Many gravitate to downtown Portland.

"We believe the state of Oregon is abdicating its responsibility by not providing needed services that would help adolescents either currently or previously involved in the foster care system transition to a more productive and stable future," a draft of the report states. "Youth are dumped on homeless youth providers, thus transferring responsibility from the Department of Human Services to the homeless youth system and Multnomah County."

The commission's findings are supported by a recent study by Casey Family Programs, which found that 27 percent of Oregon's former foster children had been homeless at least once. Last year, more than 3,900 teens 13 and older lived in foster care -- substitute, state-supervised care for neglected, abused or abandoned kids.

In 1998, the commission, a group of business leaders dedicated to resolving criminal justice issues, demanded improved county services for homeless teens after downtown merchants grew frustrated over increasing numbers of young panhandlers

in Pioneer Courthouse Square. Since then, three agencies -- Outside In, Janus Youth Programs and New Avenues for Youth -- have worked to develop a system that includes assessment services, emergency shelter, education, job training and housing for homeless youth.

In recent years, however, these agencies have grown alarmed by the high numbers of youth asking for help who are wards of the state or recently dropped from DHS custody.

Commission Chairman James B. Jeddelloh called the state's treatment of such youth "a moral issue" and said his group would fight for legislative reforms to prohibit DHS from abandoning foster children -- even those older than 18 -- until they are ready for independent living. The commission also wants the state to pay for foster children who wind up in Portland's homeless youth facilities.

"It's a shameful thing," Jeddelloh said. "Washing your hands and closing the case file of a 15-year-old foster kid is continuing the pattern of abuse to that child. Somebody's got to take responsibility and, at this point, the state needs to step up and do it."

Ramona Foley, DHS assistant director for Children, Adults and Families, said her agency "owns some of the problem."

At one time, she said, a focus on early brain development caused policy-makers to shift emphasis to services for young children, often at the expense of teens.

"I regret that historically it has not been clear to all our staff that we have a responsibility to these youths," Foley said. "I've tried to get staff to realize that we don't have an option under the law. Once they're in our custody, we have a commitment."

Agencies, state clash

Some of the youngsters who wind up on Portland's streets are fleeing foster homes. Others have recently aged out of the system and have nowhere to go. Many of them are mentally ill or have substance-abuse problems. Most have histories of abuse and lack high school diplomas or job training.

As part of its research, the commission reviewed 50 case studies of children seeking services from homeless youth agencies over the past year-and-a-half.

It found that homeless-agency workers often had to argue with DHS staff, who either refused or were unable to find placements for foster children when they showed up at the 24-hour Access and Reception Center, which assesses the needs of the 1,300 wayward youth brought there each year and serves as a point of entry into Portland's Downtown Homeless Youth Services Continuum.

In one incident, on Feb. 26, a DHS worker refused to help a 15-year-old girl with mental health problems, brought to the center by police after DHS reported her missing. When contacted by a reception center supervisor, "the DHS hot line staff responded with: 'There's nothing we're going to do for this one,'" center records state. "When questioned, (the DHS employee) reported his hope . . . was that she 'run from your program and keep on running all the way to California.'" The girl slept on the center's couch that night and fled the next morning.

Reception records reviewed by the commission also show that DHS failed to file runaway reports when teens disappeared from foster homes.

In one case, a 14-year-old girl ran from her foster home in July 2003. She lived on Portland's streets almost three months until she was brought, pregnant, to the reception center. "Staff discovered that there had been no active runaway warrant issued during these two to three months, despite her being in DHS custody," center records state.

Part of the reason so many youths, including some as young as 11, flee DHS foster-care placements is because their needs are not met, said Daniel Pitasky, a licensed clinical social worker and associate director of New Avenues for Youth.

Pitasky said a chronic shortage of foster beds for troubled teens and a lack of training for foster parents makes it "difficult to find a good match."

"Teens running away says less about them than it does the system," he said. "Younger kids have no choice but to stay. The older ones can make a statement by walking away from services. They speak with their feet."

Another group showing up in increasing numbers at Portland's homeless-youth agencies are foster children who grew up in the system and recently turned 18. Although they have "aged out" of DHS, they are not prepared for life on their own. About 220 teens age out of Oregon's foster-care system each year.

National research shows that teens discharged from foster care are less prepared for adult living than adolescents in the general population, including those from low-income families. Early and repeated removals from their own homes and from multiple foster placements disrupt emotional development.

In Oregon, it's even tougher for youth aging out of foster care. The federal Chafee Foster Care Independence Program provides grants to Oregon and other states to provide independent-living training and support, including health benefits and housing stipends, to foster children until the age of 21. But many young people are terminated from foster care or choose to leave DHS's independent living programs prematurely.

"We are weak on that end of the system," Foley said. "I think we're doing better, but we're not comfortable where we are at because the number of teens who stay in our system is lower than in many other states."

Homeless-youth workers say the problem is especially frustrating because even the most troubled youngsters can succeed with appropriate support.

"People think, 'To hell with those kids -- they're lost, nobody is going to be able to do anything with them,'" said Kenneth Cowdery, executive director of New Avenues for Youth. "There's a lot of stereotyping. But we want people to understand, these kids are very resilient. They can change. They can come back if they get the proper care. We've seen some remarkable turnarounds."

Outlining state obligations

The commission report includes policy recommendations, such as creating a system in which the state's financial obligations to the child continue, even if he or she receives county services.

It also suggests providing better cross-training between DHS and homeless-youth staff, having the state develop better foster care resources for teens, and expanding services such as education, job training and health benefits until they are 21.

Maggie Miller, executive director of the commission, said local DHS caseworkers have been supportive of efforts to remedy the problem and are becoming more receptive when contacted by homeless-youth providers. But she said a meeting last month with top state administrators, including DHS Director Gary Weeks, was disappointing.

"They listened. They said there was a problem, but they said there was not money," Miller said. "There was no will to go forward. It was very obvious that some of these people had been in government for a long time and have lost focus on how to be efficient."

Weeks disagreed with Miller's assessment.

"My conversation with them wasn't just that there wasn't enough money, though clearly there are budget issues," he said. "I stressed that we want to work collaboratively to address these problems.

"There's a reason the local staff are working so favorably with them," he said, "because they've been instructed to by my office and Ramona's."

Foley, who was not at the meeting, said she will continue efforts to serve teens who meet the statutory definition of abused and neglected, but services to homeless teens are not a priority in the proposed DHS budget for the next biennium.

"I appreciate what the commission is trying to emphasize, and it may change the conversation in years to come," she said. "We don't want these children dumped, either."

The commission says it will push legislators for a more immediate response.

"We're not here to fix DHS," commission Chairman Jeddelloh said. "We're here to fix a problem. We don't have a dog in this fight. There's absolutely no political agenda here. We're not trying to usurp anybody's authority or control or make anybody look bad.

"We're just saying: Here's an issue and some potential solutions to a problem we believe is in contrast to who we want to be as a society."

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