Out of Foster Care -- and Into What?

by Marisa Miller
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Photos by Marissa Miller Anthony Boyd, 22, Armstrong Pelzer, 26, and Joseph Branca, 22, all attend college, have part-time jobs and live at Schafer Hall, a supportive housing facility for former foster children in East Harlem.

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When Chimore Mack Glover recently turned 21, she aged out of the New York City foster child program and so needed a place to live.

"I usually plan things ahead of time, and my first step was to get a job and find a place to live," she recalled recently. She tried to stay with family members, but one turned her down, Her grandmother was sick and so could not help. "It was also very scary because I didn't know if my foster care agency was going to help me or not," said Glover.

Despite all that, Glover now says she is doing well -- living on her own and working part time.

She dreams of being a journalist some day, saying, "My grandmother always told me to chase my dreams. I love to write. It's an outlet. If I am going through something, I will just write it down. Then I'm relieved and I'm not stressed. "

In this series, Gotham Gazette will look at what government is — and is not — doing to combat poverty in the city. We will examine specific problems and the policies that address or contribute to them.

Some 1.8 million New Yorkers — about one in five — lives at or below the poverty level, with 10.5 percent trying to scrape by in deep poverty — with incomes less than half the poverty level, or below $10,500 for a family of four.

Over the past five years, the poverty level has remained largely unchanged. Meanwhile, the wealthy in our city have gotten richer, leaving New York with the widest income divide of any major city in the country.

Against this backdrop, all levels of government have sought to cut spending, reducing programs for the poor and raising fees. This has tattered a social safety net that, even in the best of times, had gaps and tears.

Previously in the series:

Who Feeds the Hungry? : More poor New Yorkers who don't get food stamps -- or whose benefits leave their cupboards bare â€“ have turned to private groups for aid, leaving charities struggling to meet the demand.

Incarcerated with Children : Thousands of city kids have parents in prison. Can their bonds survive the separation and stigma?

Paying the Rent with HIV : The city program to help people with HIV/AIDS find stable housing still leaves some New Yorkers facing almost impossible choices.

Beyond Their Means : Increases in tuition and cuts in financial aid may put City University, long a road to the middle class, out of reach for low-income New Yorkers.

A Poor Defense : In, New York many public defenders barely talk to their indigent clients â€“ let alone fight for them.

Shutting a 'Safety Net' The closing of St. Vincent's created a void for some poor New Yorkers and highlighted the woes facing hospitals that serve them.

New York's Model : On one hand, the mayor has cut city social services. On the other, he has launched private pilot projects to fight poverty â€“ to little effect. Glenn Pasanen explores the disconnect.

While things may have worked out well for Glover, every year hundreds of young adults must adapt to life after foster care-- and a number do not succeed. For many the transition presents a huge challenge, and though programs exist to help, they cannot aid all the young people who need it.

On Their Own

There are currently 16,000 children in the foster care system throughout New York City. Of them, about 1,100 leave the system each year, according to In Transition: A Better Future for Youth Leaving Foster Care, a report published in the New School's Child Welfare Watch.

The majority attempt the transition to independent living on their own. Most lack any type of a

strong support network. Not surprisingly, for these young adults, the transition to the "real world" abounds with financial, physical and emotional hardship.

Child Welfare Watch and an internal city review have found that about 15 percent of young adults who age out of foster care end up in the homeless shelter system within two years of their initial discharge.

"In extraordinary numbers, children who age out of the foster care system end up homeless, incarcerated or both in a brief time period," said Topher Nichols, the communications manager at Children's Village , a New York-based organization devoted to professional and educational development for troubled youth. "When we really look hard at our own experiences as young adults, how many times we called home because we were a little short on rent or because we made a silly mistake and needed support, we have to recognize that most of us don't become successful on our own. We have a network of people who support us and take care of us. This is a critical piece missing from the lives of most youth aging out of the city."

The one-time foster children also do not have the same opportunities as many young adults, especially when it comes to education, employment and housing, which are all connected, said Kim VanBurch, coordinator of youth development at the Vincent J. Fontana Center for Child Protection . "If they don't have an education, then they can't find employment, and if they can't find employment then they won't be able to secure housing," VanBurch said.

Preparing for the Big Change

The foster care agencies -- private organizations under contract with the city to place children in appropriate homes and monitor their care -- are supposed to prepare the children under their auspices for life after foster care, said Elysia Murphy, the deputy communications director at the city's Administration for Children's Services .

Armstrong Pelzer, who has lived at Shafer Hall for five years, draws and paints.

"Prior to leaving care, foster care caseworkers work with adolescents to develop plans in preparation for their discharge from foster care. Agencies are expected to set developmentally appropriate expectations that encourage youth to achieve their highest potential in their careers, educational and personal lives and to enable youth to plan responsibly for their own needs,"

Murphy said.

Advocates, though, say many agencies don't start this preparation until a few months before the youth is slated to leave the foster care program. This leave the young adults, some of whom suffer from mental illness and emotional instability, with few resources to turn to when trying to find a place to live and a source of income.

"In the vast majority of cases meaningful transition planning by the agencies responsible for a young person in foster care ... occurs, if at all, in a last minute scramble in the months before the adolescent is to leave foster care," said Glenn Metsch-Ampel, the deputy-executive director of Lawyers for Children . "More often than not, without the intervention of their advocates and the court, these young people are faced with the prospect of leaving foster care without truly stable housing, employment or a connection to a caring adult in their community."

To add to the difficulty, the Administration for Children's Services has suffered budget cuts over the past few years that affect its ability to handle issues confronting the city's low-income youth.

"ACS has just had budget cut after budget cut, and its internal operation services have really fallen apart. Without there being strong support inside the agency, it just means those services become vulnerable and haphazard. That means that foster care agencies do not deliver services with the same consistency," said Abigail Kramer, the associate editor of Child Welfare Watch. According to research published in Child Welfare Watch, the number of families participating in preventive service programs, which help children in foster care and neglectful or abusive homes, has dropped by 30 percent decline since 2009.

Murphy, though, denied budget cuts have had an effect on transition programs. "Despite the difficult decisions made in the past two years to reduce agency spending in response to the financial climate, the agency has been able to sustain funding to support services for youth in foster care as they make the transition into adulthood," Murphy said.

Bridging the Gap

Both New York City social workers and government officials have recognized that many young adults aging out of foster care are not adequately prepared to enter into independent living without any familial or professional support network.

All residents of Schafer Hall live in a studio apartment with a kitchen.

In 2005, the city and the state created the New York/New York III program. According to Child Welfare Watch, it provides funding for about 400 young adults who have aged out of foster care. Many of the supportive housing programs receive New York/New York III funding and thus, are able to support their residents. However, there is still a huge population of young adults leaving foster care who are left with very few options.

In the past decade, government officials, philanthropists and non-profits have created transitional housing programs. These support programs not only house young adults who have aged out of the system (at 21 in New York though they can leave at 18), but also provide them with the life skills training, academic and professional advice, and counseling to help them achieve stability in their own lives.

In the past 10 years, eight non-profits have cooperated with city agencies to establish various supportive housing programs scattered throughout the five boroughs. Most of them receive funding from a combination of private donations, and city and state programs, such as the New York State Supportive Housing Program
and the
New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
.

Sharp cutbacks to Section 8 housing vouchers and the elimination of the Advantage program, which provided rent subsides for homeless families, has severely limited the housing options for these young adults and homeless people alike. These cuts make transitional housing programs an even more important safety net for young adults coming out of foster care.

Inside Supportive Housing

In 2001, Schafer Hall became one of the first supportive housing programs established in New York City. Located in East Harlem, Schafer Hall is one of the many housing developments run by the Lantern Group , a non-profit committed to the construction and development of permanent, special needs housing.

Schafer Hall was created to help young adults acquire the independent living skills necessary to achieve a stable lifestyle. Each resident lives in one of 25 studio apartments where he or she learns how to prepare meals, maintain a clean living space, do laundry and budget their money along with other basic skills. The residents also meet regularly with on-site caseworkers and tutors who help them make decisions about their education -- obtaining a GED or working toward an associate's and bachelor's degree -- and employment.

"Our young adults are incredible bright, strong, and resilient individuals," said Jessica Katz, the executive director of the Lantern Group. "They just need to learn the necessary life skills."

The young adults living at Schafer Hall must have some source of income and use 30 percent of it to pay their monthly rent. This teaches them how to balance a budget and set aside a portion of their monthly income for their housing needs.

Many of the other supportive housing programs in the city-such as Chelsea Foyer and the Lee
also charge their clients rent and encourage the residents to seek stable employment, as opposed to welfare, as their primary source of income.

The young people, many whom leave foster care without a college degree or even a high school diploma, have limited job prospects, particularly in this economy. Despite that, Schafer Hall currently has an 85 percent employment rate amongst its residents.

For many individuals living there, Schafer Hall offers an escape from the tumult of their foster homes.

"I enjoy my home being a stress-free environment now. I'm not really territorial, but I know in my head that this is my house and no one is stressing me out. I don't have to worry about that living here, and that is good enough for me," said Anthony Boyd, a 22-year-old resident, who attends Queensboro Community College and works at , a human services organization.

Joseph Branca, also 22, has been in foster care for 13 years. He now lives at Schafer Hall,

works as a shift manager at Duane Reade and attends Medgar Evans College in Brooklyn. "I want to give back to the community," he said. "Since I grew up in foster care, I feel like I can."