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Communications

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Abstract

In this academic research paper, we will be exploring the challenges faced by recently emancipated youth. We chose this topic because of the fact that this is not often spoken about or taught to the general public. This lack of attention to these issues creates hurdles when attempting to solve these sensitive issues. Considering this, we thought it would be a strong choice for further research and review. We explored many obstacles these new adults face. One such issue that we would like to touch on is the unstable housing situation of these recently emancipated individuals. Another prudent example is the issue of healthcare. While some support systems are in place, more should be done in the form of education of these valuable resources available. In layman's terms, foster children have their basic needs covered by the state until the day they turn 18. On their 18th birthday, they are considered adults and can no longer be supported under the foster care system. This is not a system that caters to the success of foster children, this is a system that does the bare minimum. Let's explore how we can do better for foster children and subsequently be better as a society.

Key terms

Emancipation- The fact or process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions. Within our topic foster children have their basic needs covered by the state until the day they turn 18. The day after their 18th birthday they can no longer be supported by the foster care system.

Transitional Housing Program (THP)- Is a form of social housing offered by community housing providers. It offers tenancies to people with an urgent need for housing. In our case former foster youth, Transitional housing assistance allows people to stabilize their circumstances before moving on to longer term housing.

Self efficiency- The quality or condition of being self-sufficient. Economically and emotionally.

Aging out- The act of becoming 18 years old while in the foster care system and becoming legally responsible for oneself.

While the issues faced by foster youth, or rather former foster youth, are extremely vast and multifaceted; we will do our best to cover as many as possible. Let's begin with the staggering statistics linking recent emancipation to homelessness. According to the California Foundation Stats "In California, 65,000 children and youth are in the foster care system. Each year, more than 4,000 emancipate. Estimates are that somewhere around 20 percent end up homeless." (2010) This article formally breaks down one issue we are looking to explore further. Emancipated youth who have recently aged out of the foster care system, are often left without basic needs including housing. While the needs of emancipated youth extend far beyond housing, we felt that housing was an essential basic need worthy of being the first problem addressed. As this article states, around 20% of these new adults end up homeless. Many programs that support foster children dance around the fact that these kids will have to leave their group homes after their 18th birthday. This results in these individuals being extremely underprepared to face the fact of the challenges that are paired with their looming adulthood. This is supported by the fact that many teens report not having the opportunities to ever learn about housing options that may be provided in their state. Another quote from the California Foundation Stats shows how the foster system fails to prepare kids for adulthood. "The 63 young people interviewed had clear conclusions about the causes of their homelessness. No one pointed to a single event, nor did any interviewee wholly blame the child welfare system or another person. Instead, they pieced together a mosaic of events that spanned their teen years and early adulthood. They described missed opportunities to learn skills, the lack of the ability to support themselves, a shortage of second chances when things did not go right, and the fact that no one cared what happened to them." (2010) While some lucky individuals are transferred to transitional housing programs, others are simply asked to leave with their things with no place to go, or anyone to turn to. Unfortunately, things get even more challenging for what are considered "vulnerable youth". "Child welfare agencies release some youth from care when they

have nowhere to live. Instead of providing extra protections for especially vulnerable youth, including mentally ill or impaired individuals and pregnant girls, state regulations often exclude them from transitional programs."(2010) This quote states that many of the most vulnerable among foster children are actually legally excluded from taking advantage of these programs. Another issue in relation to housing is many foster kids are unable to do things that would prepare them for their future, one example being riding the bus by themself. This simple act would allow them to have an understanding of how the public transportation system works. However, this can be nuanced considering the state is responsible for the safety of these teens. Foster parents should be better trained in helping these children prepare for what challenges their future holds.

Another problem that a high percentage of recently emancipated youth face is not having access to healthcare. Unsurprisingly there is a link between "aging out", homelessness and access to healthcare as stated by the article "Homelessness and Health Care Access After Emancipation" by MD Margot B. Kushel. According to Kushel housing is the primary variable in determining if an emancipated participant was healthy. "Roughly 20,000 youth "age out" or are "emancipated" from the foster care system annually without being reunited with families. These youth are at high risk of homelessness and have poor health outcomes, including high rates of drug and alcohol use, unplanned pregnancies, and poor mental health outcomes. Foster care is a risk factor for adult homelessness; an estimated 12% of all homeless adults were in the foster care system as youth." (2007) These statistics really drive home the fact that once these youth age out, they truly are on their own. Luckily, thanks to the Affordable Care Act, children who were in foster care are eligible for free healthcare until they turn 26 years of age. However, many of these young adults are never educated on the process of how to reap the benefits of these social programs. According to National Foster Youth Insitute.org or NFYI "On average, 4 out of every 5 children and adolescents enter foster care with serious mental health issues." (

2021) This alarming statistic shows the need for not only physical, but mental health care as well. Unsurprisingly, the problem of receiving care is rooted in a lack of understanding at what resources are available to these emancipated adults. In addition to case workers, foster children should be provided with mentors to help them learn the basics of taking care of themselves through adulthood.

Some of the challenges that former foster youth face start off before they begin to exit out of the system. At the age of 17 a lot of foster youth are already lacking the support they need in order to be able to plan for their future. Youths' worries and concerns about their post-emancipation plans and life goals typically centered around academics and finances. Foster youth have difficulty identifying concrete steps to make plans a reality despite their ideas for the future. This reinforces the need for greater support in planning and goal setting prior to emancipation. According to Daisy Lemus who is one of the four authors in "The plans, goals, and concerns of pre-emancipated youth in foster care. Lack of social support and financial resources as well as fear of the unknown are key concerns echoed by older youth preparing to transition from foster care."(2017) Some of these concerns may be linked to a lack of stability and loss of important familial ties while in foster care. Overall youth in care are at greater risk for experiencing poor transitional outcomes than their same-age peers, and do not have the same safety nets available. What I mean by that is they are responsible for themselves and have no one to turn to when they have questions like 'how do I apply for college, how do I file my taxes, or how do I access healthcare'. These are just some questions a lot of their same age peers can ask their parents or even counselors. However in many cases, emancipated foster youth do not have resources such as parents or counselors to fall back on. When comparing former foster youth with same age peers who were not in the foster system, another big difference showed when they were asked about their plans for future employment. According to "The plans, goals, and concerns of pre-emancipated youth in foster care" (2017) they asked 179 pre-emancipated

youth between the ages of 17 and 20 years old about their future plans and when asked about employment, these participants responded: "whatever I can," "anywhere," or "any type of work". Some provided longer responses, but the same level of explicitness, such as "well, for right now, I can't be really choosy, so whatever is open and pays good money". When you compared those answers with some answers from peers who were similarly aged but not in the foster system, their answers were less vague and more precise like "dental assistant," "journalist," "nurse." This goes to show how these youth see themselves and how much they think they are capable off, it could be that no one has ever presented them with these possibilities, therefore making them think that these goals are not achievable.

Within the community of emancipated youth there is a large amount of tension between pushing youth to become self-sufficient and teaching them how to create and maintain a social support system. This becomes a bigger problem when it comes to housing outcomes, how the youth are treated within the different Transitional Housing Programs (THP) or Independent Living Programs (ILP) and what services they receive. "In one study utilizing in-depth interviews with a subset of 44 youth from the Midwest study, Samuels and Pryce found that a strong desire for self-reliance led to a sense of disconnection from others and a fear of seeking and receiving emotional support."(2015). Having momentarily lived in a THP from 2017-2019 I can definitely attest to the results from this study. The staff within the THP that I resided in would assert the need to become self-sufficient and learn how to become an "adult". However, If we were not doing something to their liking or expectation, they would not treat us like adults but would treat us and talk to us like we were little kids, often saying things like "you will never make it out in the world doing things like that" and watching our every action in an overbearing manner. This would typically make me feel restricted like I was a minor living back in one of the foster homes. On top of that, they made sure to apply pressure on being self-sufficient, however especially in a house full of men, asking for help can seem belittling. There was a sense of pride when we

persevered through hardships and we showed that we were self-reliant. There is also a fear of dependence on others that's embedded within a larger societal context. Sometimes using the resources that are available to former foster youth was held over our heads in a degrading/ humiliating manner by the staff that run these programs. This kind of treatment is often mentally exhausting and never once while I was living at this THP did they communicate with me I was able to obtain any mental health assistance or therapy.

Expanding on the lack of support that former foster youth face, we can take a closer look at distinguishing experiences between the genders. According to "A Growth Curve Analysis of Housing Quality among Transition-Aged Foster Youth" (2017), young females experienced higher quality housing over time comparable to young men transitioning out of foster care. Due to norms of gender socialization, females are more socialized to seek help or support in their times of need and tend to develop more intimate relationships than males. This provides them with a stronger support system. It is deemed in society as socially unacceptable and frowned upon when a male shows weakness or lack of independence. Females are also seen as more vulnerable and offered more support and resources than males. All emancipated youth are vulnerable to the same hardships and obstacles to overcome, especially during their transitional periods. The system should offer support, education, and positive coping strategies for all youth emancipating the system to better prepare them for the real world. It is unrealistic for these young adults aging out of the system to try to take on their own wellbeing entirely. This is often a reason we see them in horrible situations; homeless, in jail, or abusing drugs. They must be taught how to utilize the resources and support available to them, the importance of creating a support system for themselves, and understand that there is no shame in doing so.

Our important topic relates to multiple Learning Outcomes of Communication. Let's begin with LOC #7 or "the application of ethical communication principles and practices" is of

relevance to our topic. Considering the many challenges that recently emancipated youth face, the solutions raised to combat these problems have to be practiced ethically. Furthermore, it is important that one communicates about issues such as these in a way that is respectful and well informed. This means it's of the utmost importance to not misrepresent the groups of people that we are trying to support. This includes finding sources that are worthy of these issues and of being in an academic research paper. Learning how to write ethically about topics such as these is a skill that the communication discipline nurtures. Our semesters learning about communication and the nuanced nature of communicating effectively, have been extremely beneficial to skillsets beyond the completion of this research paper. These skills also have benefited us as individuals. Another aspect of LOC #7 is "Explain the relevance of various ethical perspectives" In this regard, we have strived to look at this multifaceted problem from multiple perspectives and communicate the intricacies of this seldom talked about issue to a broader audience.

To continue our dissection of our learning outcomes, we would like to relate our research paper to LOC #9. This LOC is defined as "Influencing public discourse". We achieved this goal by bringing attention to the challenges that recently emancipated youth face in their journey to become self-sufficient adults. One aspect of this LOC was "Identify the challenges facing communities and the role of communication in resolving those challenges". It was our goal to bring some of these ethical issues to the mainstream narrative. Communicating the challenges young adults face to uniformed members of our communities is the first step in solving some of the ethical issues of how the foster system handles the aging out of these new adults. Another part of LOC #9 is "Advocate a course of action to address local, national and/ or global issues from a communication perspective" As we stated earlier in this paper, lack of communication regarding what support services are available to emancipated foster youth is a glaring issue with

the system today. The state needs to do a better job at educating foster children about the resources available to them.

To recap our research on this topic, there are a plethora of challenges that recently emancipated youth have to navigate on their journey to adulthood. These struggles vary in nature and are quite numerous. Access to affordable housing and healthcare are just the surface issues that need to be addressed. Supporting people in the foster system on an emotional level is another important way we can improve our treatment of foster youth. Furthermore, communication of public resources available to foster children is extremely lacking. The addition of mentors who specialize in public resources could be one solution to improve the communication of the social services that are provided. An emphasis on explaining the resources available would go a long way for making this transition out of the foster system much less stressful. To have support systems in place for emancipated youth, without proper communication of the services or resources available to them, is inexcusable. The goal of this research paper was to not only bring to light the challenges that emancipated foster youth face while transitioning to public life on their own. We also wanted to showcase how our years of studying the communication discipline have better prepared us to explain such a delicate issue to not only our peers, but to the world as well.

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