

How New York Can Help its Foster Children Succeed

by JUDITH S. KAYE

Sometimes the state must intervene in the lives of families and remove children from their homes. It is a grave and difficult step taken solely to protect the health and well-being of the children.

With that decision, the state literally becomes “in loco parentis,” the parent for the nearly 20,000 children in foster care. And with that responsibility comes a parental and moral obligation to ensure that these young people are positioned for independence, self-reliance and success.

In many ways, New York has let these young people down. However, there are steps that can have an immediate and significant impact. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has signaled an intent and desire to remedy this type of shortcoming through various elements of his Opportunity Agenda.

The reality today is that far too many young people leave foster care without the permanency and support of a stable family or the benefit of an education. A quarter experience homelessness within the first few years of leaving foster care, half are unemployed at the age of 24, and 1 in 4 will be caught up in the criminal justice system within two years.

The startling outcomes are due in no small part to the lack of success foster youth experience in higher education. Only 50 percent of youth in foster

care graduate from high school and only 20 percent of those few will ever set foot on a college campus. And a mere fraction of those will earn a degree.

Compare these figures with the general population, in which 60 percent of high school graduates attend college. The disservice being done to our youth in foster care is abundantly clear.

The opportunity for a college degree can go a long way to mitigate these dismal consequences and provide a better path to the future for the nearly 4,000 youth in care of college age.

Across the nation, 22 states provide full tuition waivers to their youth in foster care. Several states provide additional supports to further their prospect of college graduation. New York provides none of these benefits or supports.

Young people with college degrees fare far better in the world. The most recent data from the National Center for Educational Statistics indicate that adults aged 25 to 34 with a bachelor's degree work more consistently throughout the year and earn nearly \$47,000 on average -- more than twice the median income of those without a degree. As New York's chief judge, I learned how much more we can and must do to ensure a successful future for children who come before New York's courts. Comprehensive financial aid, covering tuition and living expenses, filling in gaps left by

existing public resources, is the clear first step.

Having intervened to “protect” children by placing them in foster care, New York should also invest in their futures by clearing and supporting their paths to college graduation and all of the opportunity that comes with it. Full tuition waivers at SUNY at CUNY colleges and universities, access to housing during semester breaks, and specially trained campus advisers to help them navigate college life, would change today's grim picture and provide opportunity for these young people.

As the budget process moves forward in Albany, I support a proposal endorsed by a coalition of nearly 70 advocacy and child-welfare organizations. The Fostering Youth Success Alliance estimates the investment in the first year at \$3 million. The proposal promotes success in college and in life by bridging financial gaps and establishing a comprehensive system of supports that would remove many of the roadblocks youth in foster care face as they confront higher education.

New York can and should become a national leader and a true champion for its most vulnerable children.

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