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Too Old for Foster Care, and Facing the Recession

By [JULIE BOSMAN](#)

Even in boom times, young people who become too old for the foster-care system often struggle to make it on their own, lacking families, job skills or adequate educations. Now, the recession has made the challenges of life after foster care even more formidable, especially for those seeking federal housing vouchers, which are contingent on having an income.

Since the beginning of this year, the city's [Administration for Children's Services](#) has been providing letters to those about to leave the foster care system, certifying that they are likely to be eligible for public assistance and thus easing the application process when they are ready. Yet, many child-welfare advocates worry that a growing number will still end up homeless.

"They get a lot of resources until they're 21, and then essentially none," said James J. Golden, the executive director of the [Edwin Gould Academy in East Harlem](#), which provides housing exclusively to former foster children. "It's like falling off a cliff for some of them."

In New York, foster children are allowed to leave the system when they turn 18 but can stay until 21; last year, 407 wards turned 21, while 547 opted out early — 375 at age 18, and 172 at 19 or 20.

Once discharged from the system, some move in with family or friends, get jobs or go to college. Others apply for welfare as their sole source of income, and often end up homeless.

Administrators at the [Chelsea Foyer at the Christopher](#), which houses dozens of former and current foster youths, said that typically, 90 percent of their residents were employed, but that in February only 70 percent had jobs.

"They are the low man on the totem pole for jobs anyway," said Jerome Kilbane, the executive director of Covenant House New York, a nonprofit that operates shelters for young people. "Now they are even more at a disadvantage."

Michael Smith, 20, said he was increasingly anxious as he approached the day in August that he will have to leave his foster home in Brooklyn. He has been searching for work since October, leaving résumés at places like McDonald's and the clothing stores Express and H & M.

Mr. Smith graduated from high school in Queens in 2006 and went to Kingsborough Community College, but he dropped out after his sickle-cell anemia caused him to miss class frequently.

"I'm coming up to my 21st birthday, when I'm no longer going to be supported," Mr. Smith said. "I feel

overlooked all the times I do go apply for these jobs. But I have to do this, or else I'll be out on the street.”

Officials at the Administration for Children's Services say they do everything possible to avert that, including the letters that help smooth the application process for public assistance.

The child-welfare agency and the 36 foster-care groups with which it contracts begin to prepare children for independence as early as age 14. There are workshops on budgeting, job hunting, how to sign up for health insurance and how to negotiate with a landlord over rent.

At age 19, foster youths begin to talk to caseworkers about housing options, which commonly include Section 8 vouchers, public housing projects and supportive housing, where counseling and job training might be available on site.

The Administration for Children's Services provides a one-time stipend of \$750 as a cushion to foster youths when they exit the system. They are also eligible for a monthly payment of \$300 from the city, from the time they leave foster care until they are 21 ½, if they are not receiving any other public housing subsidy, such as Section 8.

Most of those leaving foster care are entitled to Section 8, which typically allows tenants to rent apartments for one-third of their monthly income. But that means they need income to qualify. And with unemployment rates in New York rising precipitously, foster-care workers are worried.

“To be honest, I'm afraid that our youth are really going to be unable to secure housing,” said Jane Feyder, the assistant director at the New York Foundling Fontana Center for Child Protection. “They don't have the work experience that other people have who are looking for jobs right now. They're competing with so many other people who have advantages over them.”

Even advocates for foster youth acknowledge that they are a particularly difficult group to employ.

Many lack high school diplomas, having spent adolescence being shuttled from home to home. The responsibilities of a first job can come as a shock, and many quit out of frustration.

“A year ago, if they'd lose one \$9- an-hour job, there was usually another one that we could find them,” Mr. Golden said. “Now it's a little more costly to become unemployed.”

One of the former foster children in his care, Jessica Molina, landed a job in January 2008, working in computer technology at [Merrill Lynch](#). She was laid off in June when the company downsized, and has been working at temporary jobs since.

“Like everyone else, I have my fingers crossed that I'll find something,” Ms. Molina, 22, said. But looking at the gaps in her résumé, she is often reminded of the constant moves between group homes she endured during her teenage years. “Sometimes you're looked at as a castaway,” she said. “It's like coming from a totally different place.”

Brenda Tully, the program director for Chelsea Foyer at the Christopher, said residents have been laid off or seen their hours reduced at jobs in gyms, nightclubs and clothing stores.

“There’s a much greater fear among the young people about what to expect,” Ms. Tully said. “They are very, very concerned that they’re not going to be able to find housing that’s affordable.”

Stephany Diaz, a housing specialist for New York Foundling, one of the city’s largest foster-care agencies, said she has begun prodding youths to apply for public assistance once they are officially discharged from care.

“I used to discourage them to go down that route,” she said. “But now we almost have to.”

Since 2002, the Administration for Children’s Services has tried to move teenagers out of group homes and into foster care, hoping that when the time comes to leave, the children would have families to turn to.

“We want children to leave care with a loving, caring and supportive adult who’s going to continue to work with them long past their 21st birthday,” said Lorraine Stephens, a deputy commissioner at the Administration for Children’s Services. “We don’t want any kid to leave without someone connected to them.”

But many children have tenuous connections to foster families, at best.

Mr. Smith, whose aunt is his foster parent, said staying with her after his 21st birthday is not an option. “She’s moving in with her boyfriend,” he said.

Melissa Diaz, 19, left the foster care system more than a year ago, shortly after her foster mother died. Ms. Diaz later moved to Covenant House, and after nearly three months of searching found a job stocking shelves at Duane Reade.

She is training to become a nursing assistant and trying to earn enough money to become independent and afford housing on her own. “That would be great,” she said. “It would be a blessing from God.”