



Embargoed for Release

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Contact:
Raymonde Charles
Day: (401) 351-9400, Ext. 22
Evening: (401) 954-3892

**In Recognition of National Foster Care Month,
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Releases Latest *Issue Brief*:**

Building Better Lives for Youth in Foster Care

Last year 90 Rhode Island youth “aged out” of foster care having never gained placement with a permanent family. Of these youth, 70 were older than age 12 when they entered state care and 20 had entered care before the age of 12. These youth are at high risk of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, incarceration and poor health.

The Issue Brief calls for DCYF and other partners to ensure that all youth leave foster care with permanent, lifelong connections to caring adults. Other recommendations focus on improved strategies to help youth in foster care finish high school and attend college, obtain stable employment, find and maintain quality housing and have access to quality health care.

PROVIDENCE, RI, May 16, 2006 – In recognition of National Foster Care Month, today Rhode Island KIDS COUNT will release its latest *Issue Brief* entitled *Building Better Lives for Youth in Foster Care*, at a policy forum with youth in foster care, service providers, state agencies, advocates, and political and community leaders to be held at **Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, One Union Station, Providence, RI from 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. on Tuesday, May 16th**. The Rhode Island KIDS COUNT *Issue Brief* series is made possible through the support of CVS/pharmacy.

The forum highlighted the challenges faced by young people ages 14 to 21 who are currently in foster care in Rhode Island, many of whom are likely to “age out” of the system without having gained placement with a permanent family. In most states, youth in state care become emancipated – or “age out” – at the age of 18. In Rhode Island, the social worker, Family Court, and the youth must decide whether to close the case at age 18 or keep the case open until the age of 21. If the case remains open until the age of 21, youth remain eligible for a range of services and supports.

The presentation of the *Issue Brief* findings was followed by a panel of youth who are currently in foster care or have recently been in foster care. These youth display remarkable resilience, resourcefulness, determination, and courage as they prepare to live independently. Yet, many of these youth have neither the security of a family nor the skills and resources necessary to live independently and transition successfully to adulthood.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
One Union Station
Providence, RI 02903
401/351-9400
401/351/1758

The *Issue Brief* highlights some of the perspectives of youth who grew up in the foster care system and eventually aged out of care without a permanent family. One youth noted, “When you leave, there is no one there for you. You have no one to turn to when you need help. Who am I going to turn to – my family? Why do you think I was in foster care in the first place? You need someone who supports, cares for and loves you for as long as you are around.”

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT highlighted the importance of improving outcomes for all children, especially those most vulnerable children entrusted to the care of the state. “Learning to live independently is a lifelong process and for most children this development is continuously supported in a family setting. For youth who are in the care and custody of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, the state has the responsibility to ensure that they have the opportunities to develop the skills and build support systems that will continue into adulthood. When youth age out of the foster care system without permanent relationships with caring adults, they begin adulthood without the support they need to successfully meet life’s challenges. We need to do more to ensure that we meet our responsibilities to youth in state care.”

Research indicates that youth who age out of out-of-home placements experience high rates of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, and poor health. These young adults are also at increased risk of early parenthood and becoming a victim of a violent crime. In Rhode Island as of December 2005, there were 2,855 children in out-of-home placement. Of these, more than half (1,521) were age 14 and older. The terms “foster care” and “out-of-home placement” are often used interchangeably to refer to all types of out-of-home placement for children in the care of the state, including residential facilities, relative and non-relative foster homes, group homes, independent living, supervised apartments and other living situations. In Rhode Island between federal Fiscal Years (FY) 1998 and 2005, 546 youth aged out of foster care without having been placed with a permanent family. In FY 2005, youth aging out represented 13% of all exits from out-of-home placement for Rhode Island children older than age 12 at entry.

Kat Keenan, Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT summarized the findings of the *Issue Brief*, noting, “We must provide youth in foster care with the education and the life skills that will help them to become responsible adults. We must ensure that youth who age out of care have lifelong supportive connections with caring adults. This requires that DCYF have the systems in place to recruit and license an adequate supply of foster care homes to safely provide care to children and youth. It is critical that we bolster supports and services available to families willing to adopt or serve as legal guardians to older youth. In addition, more needs to be done to systematically improve the permanency options for older youth in state care.” As of June 2005, 526 youth in the care of DCYF either had a case plan goal of long-term foster care or independent living. Many of these youth will be unlikely to find permanent connections to sustain them in adulthood.

Consequences of Aging Out

Youth who age out of foster care face significant barriers to success as adults. The consequences of aging out to these young adults manifest themselves in everything from educational attainment, employment and financial security to physical and mental well-being. The consequences of aging out of foster care are not only costly to the youth, but to Rhode Island communities. One youth who is currently in foster care commented, “Investing in us now is really a long-term investment. You may not think you see a lot out of it now, but we are going to grow up to be better members of society; we’ll set examples for other kids and we’ll be paying taxes like everyone else instead of being in jail or homeless.” The following highlights some of the consequences of aging out of state care that are highlighted in the *Issue Brief*.

- *Permanency and Lifelong Connections:* Learning to live independently is a lifelong process and for most children this development is continuously supported in a family setting. When youth emancipate without permanent relationships with caring adults, they begin adulthood unsupported to successfully meet life’s challenges.
- *Education:* High school graduation and advancement to post-secondary education are two indicators of success following emancipation, yet these positive outcomes are less likely among youth in state care. Nationally, approximately 50% of youth in out-of-home placement graduate high school, compared to 70% of their peers. Approximately 20% of foster youth with a high school diploma attended a college or university.
- *Employment and Financial Security:* National research indicates that two to four years after youth left the foster care system, only 38% had stayed employed and only 48% had held a full-time job. Although many youth formerly in foster care do work, their employment is often sporadic and seldom provides the financial security needed to be independent. One national study found that 33% of former foster youth were living at or below the poverty threshold, a rate three times the national poverty statistic. Given the economic hardship, nationally about 1 in 6 former foster youth were receiving cash assistance.
- *Health and Mental Health:* Children in out-of-home placements have significantly higher rates of acute and chronic medical problems, behavioral problems, developmental delays and educational disorders than other children from similar backgrounds. Nationally, it is estimated that one-third of former foster youth do not have health insurance, while over half had a current mental health problem.
- *Housing and Homelessness:* Low educational attainment and lower paying employment, coupled with the rising cost of housing and rent make finding and maintaining safe and affordable housing for youth who have aged out of care nearly impossible. National studies indicate that 10% to 36% of youth who were formerly involved with the foster care system were homeless at least briefly after leaving care.
- *Early Parenthood:* Strong and healthy relationships between adults and teens are an important influence on whether teens become pregnant, or cause a pregnancy. Youth in out-of-home placements are not always able to develop these relationships. Several studies indicate that nationally the birth rate for girls in foster care is more than double the rate of their peers outside the foster care system.
- *Juvenile Justice and Criminal Justice Systems:* Youth in out-of-home placement are more likely than their peers to become involved in the juvenile justice system or the criminal justice system as adults. Of the 280 adjudicated youth within the care and custody of the Training School on December 31, 2005 almost half had at some point in their childhood been victims of documented

child abuse and neglect. (No data are currently available on the connection of youth formerly in the care of DCYF and those serving a sentence at the Rhode Island Department of Corrections).

Youth in state care who receive more training and services, who have real work experiences and have positive and permanent support systems prior to exiting care, experience better outcomes after exiting the foster care system. The *Issue Brief* offers a range of specific recommendations to better meet the needs and challenges of older youth in the foster care system. Included in these recommendations are the following:

- Improve placement permanency options for older youth by increasing supports and services available through guardianship and adoption, if reunification is not possible. Additional health and mental health services, education supports and transitional services can improve the lives of youth in these permanent placements while systematically improving the permanency options for other older youth in state care.
- Ensure that no youth ages out of DCYF care without the identification of adult supportive relationships. To do this, periodic case reviews and earnest searches for permanent connections must be done from the opening of a case to the transition plan.
- Connect youth in out-of-home placements to mentors who can guide them as they consider their educational options and help navigate the transition between high school and college or vocational training.
- Expand current funding options for higher education for youth in state care, by enhancing the Chafee Education and Training Voucher Program and the Higher Education Opportunity Incentive Grant.
- Build connections to and improve incentives for the business community, state agencies, the non-profit community to train and hire current and former foster youth.
- Enhance employment training, life skills and financial management skills for those aging out of care, including preserving quality independent living placements for youth up until the age of 21.
- Expand RIte Care health insurance to include youth through age 21 who age out of foster care to emancipation and youth who are in school attending college part-time.
- Improve assistance for youth aging out of care to secure safe and affordable housing. This can be achieved by prioritizing youth for public housing assistance and designating units for former foster youth in new affordable housing projects.
- Improve the current data systems and develop mechanisms for longitudinal tracking of outcomes for youth in out-of-home placements. There is currently not enough Rhode Island data used to manage cases and to understand the short-term and long-term outcomes of Rhode Island youth in state care.

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children's policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, education, safety and development of Rhode Island's children. The Rhode Island KIDS COUNT *Issue Brief Series* is supported through a grant from CVS/pharmacy.