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Drive to give youths time

Advocates say an extra year in foster care could help disabled teens stay off streets.

By Jocelyn Wiener - Bee Staff Writer

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Three years ago, Christopher Rambadt was stabbed to death along the American River. He was 22 years old and homeless, an emotionally disturbed, developmentally delayed young man who had been a ward of the state until he was 18.

What would have happened if he had stayed in the state's care an extra year?

Some who knew Rambadt believe it might have helped save his life.

A lawsuit making its way through the courts demands that foster youth with disabilities be allowed to stay in state custody one more year before they "age out" of the system -- until age 19. The lawsuit illuminates the special difficulties faced by a population that often flies under the radar of researchers and policymakers.

A recent study by the Children's Advocacy Institute in San Diego found that 65 percent of foster youth in California leave care without having a place to live.

Young people with severe disabilities, like Rambadt, "have no more business being on the streets than the man on the moon," said DeWayne Norris, manager of systems improvement for Casey Family Programs. "It's just a farce for them to be out there on their own."

Norris and other advocates say allowing young people with disabilities to stay in state care until 19 -- or, ideally, 21 -- could help smooth their transition into independent living. They say young people would receive help accessing adult services, such as supportive housing and Supplemental Security Income.

The attorneys bringing the lawsuit contend the state discriminates against youth with disabilities, because these young people need extra time to finish school.

They point to a statute that permits youth to stay in foster care until age 19 if they are on track to graduate high school. If they aren't on track to graduate by 19, they must leave state custody at 18.

"For any 18-year-old, it's a scary proposition going out in the world on your own," said Corene Kendrick, a staff attorney with the Youth Law Center. "Going out on the world on your own when you have a disability is really daunting."

The lawsuit, filed in state court this summer by the Public Interest Law Project, the Youth Law Center and the Western Center on Law and Poverty, names John Wagner, director of the state Department of Social Services, as its defendant.

State attorneys have since had the lawsuit transferred to federal court, arguing that the issue pertains more to the federal government than to the state. A hearing on which court has jurisdiction is scheduled for next month.

Larry Bolton, the state Social Services' chief counsel, said the state is merely following the federal lead. The federal government does not provide states with funding for foster youth who are older than 18 and not on track to graduate, Bolton said.

If the state were to assume the entire financial burden, he said, initial estimates show California would have to shell out \$35 million per year for eligible youth.

By contrast, if a court decided the federal government had to provide funding, the state estimates it would be responsible for about \$11 million.

At least half the states in the country, including New York and Illinois, allow foster youth to stay in care until at least age 21 to pursue their education or if they have significant disabilities, according to a list compiled by the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development. The states generally pay for that extra care themselves.

Legislation proposed by Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., would extend that option to young people throughout the nation.

Those considered disabled would include children receiving federal SSI benefits, receiving services through the Regional Center Program or getting special education, as well as children who can prove they have a disability.

Portland State University researcher Sarah Geenen says studies show some 40 percent of adolescents in foster care also are in special education. More than 54 percent experienced some sort of mental health disorder, such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Although little research has been done specifically on foster youth with disabilities, Geenen and others say they tend to have a tougher time than other foster youth making it on their own.

Geenen said youth with disabilities bounce from placement to placement more frequently than their non-disabled counterparts. Their foster parents often are ill-prepared to care for a child with a disability and unable to advocate effectively for them.

They have lower grade-point averages, earn fewer credits toward graduation and have a harder time on standardized tests. Because of legal restrictions, some foster parents don't teach young people independent living skills such as cooking, driving or taking medication.

Tasha Norris, director of the WIND Youth Center for homeless youth in North Sacramento, said teens who come to her from the foster system often lack street smarts exhibited by other young people.

"They just never can get right," she said. "They really can't pull it together."

One youth at the WIND Center, Angenetta Shabazz, 21, said she was slower than other kids

growing up. She dropped out in 11th grade. She spent eight years in foster care, during which time she bounced from Stockton to Fairfield to Sacramento to Citrus Heights. The longest she ever stayed in a placement was 18 months. Despite that instability, she said foster care gave her a "false sense of security" that left her ill-prepared.

"You're in nice houses, nice cars, everyone was going to college," Shabazz said. "It's not that easy."

Another homeless former foster youth, Elizabeth Ballesteros, 19, said her lowest moment came on her second night staying in a women's shelter in Oak Park. She had been given the boot by several friends and relatives after leaving foster care. That night at the shelter, she broke down and started sobbing.

"I felt like it was just me out there," she said. "Nobody else. Just me."

Ballesteros, who didn't learn to read until sixth grade, was in special education classes in high school. She graduated but said as an 18-year-old she was ill-prepared to strike out on her own. Her foster mother, with whom she did not get along, gave her pots and pans for birthday presents each year. But no one told her how to find housing.

Norris, the WIND Center director, knew Christopher Rambadt for years before he was killed.

"He was so ill-equipped to be out on the streets," she said. "And there's tons of Chris Rambadts."

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