

## Guest Commentary: Foster youths get county help beyond age 18

By Federal Glover For the Contra Costa Times San Jose Mercury News

Posted:

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Because of confidentiality laws, specifics surrounding the case of the young adults mentioned in the Contra Costa Times article and the KGO radio report cannot be addressed in this forum.

Contra Costa County has taken steps to ensure that foster youth who reach the age of emancipation are not left to fend on their own by providing an array of services and aid beyond the age of 18 into adulthood. The law authorized by AB12 takes effect in January 2013 leaving kids who turn 18 having to wait to apply.

AB12 calls for the state to offer housing and support services for those in foster care between the ages of 18 and 21, as long as they meet certain criteria such as being enrolled in school, working or making progress toward those goals, or are disabled.

Foster care youth who turn 18 this year, the first group under the new law, have the option so far to stay with their foster families, live with relatives or be placed in the Independent Living Program.

Currently, Contra Costa has 58 youths who might fall in this category.

I want to reassure readers, however, the county has instituted programs and provided aid to support emancipated youth as they transition into young adults.

Some of you may have heard horror stories of foster youth finding a suitcase on the porch when they turn 18. That might be the case elsewhere, but not in Contra Costa County.

While the county recognizes the impacts of AB12, and the potential for creation of "bubble kids" who might not have the support they did before turning 18, the county decided long ago that we would not let our youth fall into a gap.

As each youth nears the age of 18, the county's Independent Living Plan begins working with the youth and in their midteen years the county provide even more structure and coaching. Of course, these youth, once they become adults, do have the right to walk away from our services. However, almost all have chosen to take part in the after-18 program. The one who did choose to leave has returned and requested services again. The county is working with him to restore his access to needed programs and support.

The county works with the youth to ensure access to transitional housing. That means we do not simply rubber stamp an extension of housing arrangements before emancipation. What is important to us is to develop a client-specific plan with the input from the foster youth. We know the one-size-fits-all plan doesn't work.

The overwhelming success rate of our transitional living program attests to this approach of designing an individual plan for each youth.

Although the Board of Supervisors passed a resolution to support AB12, and we have a strong interest in the follow-up bills now making their way through the legislature, it didn't require legislation for the county to adopt this approach. We strongly hope and encourage the state to consider dedicated funding to support the extension of foster care all the way to age 21.

Like any parent, I believe that the children who enter the County's system are ours until they can succeed on their own. That's the type of commitment our child welfare workers show with each and every case, no matter how difficult the circumstances.

I appreciate and encourage the media to continue to spotlight the needs of "bubble kids," and all foster youth and the real problems that many of those kids can face. Most find a way to survive in our society but too many end up homeless or in jail

I congratulate David Colby for getting accepted at Cal, I encourage other foster youth to pursue your dreams for a higher education and a good job. Be assured, the county will do what it can to help you attain those dreams.

Through my Youth Summit, the youth programs I have instigated and promoted, the county's efforts in working with foster youth and kids in detention, the DA's anti-truancy policies and numerous job-training opportunities, I will continue to support any efforts to broaden the discussion of the foster child system and how they transition into adulthood.

For more information about Independent Living Program, go to: Independent Living Skills Program.

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