

# Voluntary Extension of Foster Care – 5/17/10

## WRJ Board of Directors Statement

The Israelites said "Indeed, our children will be our guarantors." The Holy One said: "They are certainly the best guarantors. For their sake I give the Torah to you." Song of Songs Rabba 24:1

Most children in North America are reared by parents. If children do not have parents or, if their parents are unable to care for them, this responsibility falls to the community and the foster care system. The age at which youth are expected to make a transition to independence from the foster care system into adulthood depends upon the state and sometimes even the county in which they live, but for many it is eighteen years of age. Yearly, almost 30,000 young people in the United States age-out of foster care when they turn eighteen and are cut off from support services, which frequently is a traumatic process.

A major study, known as the Midwest Study, is monitoring a sample of youngsters from three Midwestern states, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois, as they move from foster care to adulthood.<sup>1</sup> Researchers from the University of Chicago, the University of Washington in Seattle, the University of Wisconsin, and the child welfare agencies of the three states in which the young people reside hold in-depth interviews with the same participants every two years.

The Midwest Study began in 2002 when the participants were seventeen and eighteen years of age. Its most recent findings, based on interviews at ages twenty-three and twenty-four, were released in April 2010. Comparisons were made between the sample of youth in the Midwest Study and those in a study of a nationally representative young people from the general population. The Midwest Study Executive Summary states that the comparisons reveal that youngsters aging out of foster care at eighteen are "faring poorly as a group, relative to their peers" in the general population, across a variety of areas, such as:

- Lack of stable housing and/or homelessness;
- Study participants were more than "three times as likely not to have a high school diploma or GED, half as likely to have completed any college, and one-fifth as likely to have a college degree";
- Fifty-two percent of non-incarcerated former foster youth in the study were unemployed compared to 24% of that age group in the general population;
- Two-thirds of the young women had been pregnant, of them, two-thirds had been pregnant more than once since leaving foster care;
- "Seventy percent of the young women, . . . and 29% of the young men, were currently receiving benefits from need-based government programs," such as public housing, food stamps, and/or Medicaid; and
- Young male participants in the study reported much more involvement with the criminal justice system than did those of the same age group in the general population.

The study also compared outcomes for young people from Illinois, which permits foster care until young people are twenty-one, to those from Iowa and Wisconsin, where foster care services are generally terminated when young people reach their eighteenth birthdays. "The data suggest that extending foster care until age twenty-one may be associated with better outcomes, at least in some domains," indicating the potential value of voluntary extension of foster care until age twenty-one.

*For more information on WRJ and Social Justice, visit [www.wrj.org/social-justice-home](http://www.wrj.org/social-justice-home)*

In October 2008, Congress passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (HR 6893). It provides for the receipt of matching federal funds to enable states to extend foster care services to young adults ages eighteen to twenty-one on a voluntary basis. This federally-matched funding for transition-aged youth becomes available in October 2010.

Previous to its passage, Illinois, New York, Massachusetts, Vermont, and the District of Columbia had begun to provide voluntary extension of foster care services. Some states, including Connecticut, California, Texas, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin, allow a young person to remain in foster care to finish high school or college. Recently the state legislatures of Washington, Texas, and Minnesota enacted legislation that takes advantage of the federal funding match to provide services for foster youth until their twenty-second birthday. There is similar legislation pending in Massachusetts, California, and Delaware for voluntary extension of foster care. In states that have pending legislation, budgetary considerations are the primary reasons for delays in enacting the proposed legislation.

In Canada, specific laws and regulations concerning foster care are under provincial and territorial jurisdiction. The Child and Family Services Act in Ontario requires youngsters to leave foster care at the age of eighteen. "They may continue to receive monetary support and some counseling and support services, but they are expected to establish themselves as independent young adults."<sup>4</sup> Advocates have called for financial assistance, educational aid, and emotional support extended to at least twenty-five years of age, which is considered a "must do."

Based on its long history of resolutions in behalf of children's well-being in the United States and around the world, the WRJ Board of Directors supports state legislation that provides foster care services for youth over the age of eighteen to help them transition into stable and healthy adulthoods.

Women of Reform Judaism calls on its sisterhoods to:

- Become informed about the age at which termination of foster care services takes place in their states, provinces and territories, its impact on the young people, and whether there are community efforts to provide an extension of services.
- Congratulate the law makers and administrators in states that have already funded voluntary extension of foster care beyond age eighteen and/or offered transitional support services to former foster youth;
- Support voluntary extension of foster care services to age twenty-one in states with pending legislation or which have not yet enacted legislation; and
- Work with state and local child welfare agencies and coalitions to urge their legislators to implement laws that enable participation in federal foster care grant programs as soon as they become available in October 2010

1 <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/midwest-evaluation-adult-functioning-former-foster-youth>

2 [http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest\\_Study\\_ES\\_Age\\_23\\_24.pdf](http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest_Study_ES_Age_23_24.pdf)

3 <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/midwest-evaluation-adult-functioning-former-foster-youth>

4 <http://www.oacas.org/pubs/oacas/papers/oacaschildwelfarereport2010.pdf>