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State urged to aid former foster kids

Lack of support leads many to become homeless or jobless, a report concludes.

By Clea Benson - Bee Capitol Bureau

Published 12:00 am PST Wednesday, January 17, 2007

California provides foster youth with less than 5 percent of the financial support that average parents spend on their young adult children, according to a report released Tuesday by a San Diego-based advocacy group.

A lack of assistance with tuition, rent and other necessities is one of the reasons many former foster youth become homeless or unemployed, the report by the Children's Advocacy Institute said.

"They are legally our children," said Robert Fellmeth, director of the institute, which is affiliated with the University of San Diego School of Law. "They are your children, public officials. ... And how you treat them is the proper measure of your devotion to family values."

On average, young adults in California receive about \$44,000 in parental financial support between their 18th and 26th birthdays, the report said. Foster children receive less than \$2,200 in aid from the existing support programs after they leave state guardianship at 18.

The group is calling for the state to start providing more support in the form of a \$38 million annual program that would give a former foster children monthly stipend and services for five years after they turn 18.

The group released a cost-benefit analysis projecting that the state would save money in the long run if the stipend program successfully kept former foster children off welfare, out of prison and employed.

At a Capitol news conference Tuesday, current and former foster youth said they could use the help.

Nancy O'Reilly, 26, said she dropped out of community college soon after she turned 18 because she could not afford to support herself completely and go to school at the same time.

"I knew I was one step away from disaster," she said. "If I missed a couple of days of work, I would end up on the street."

O'Reilly, now a student at California State University, Stanislaus, said it was not until she was adopted at the age of 24 by a mentor that she was able to return to her studies.

Her two sisters, she said, were not as lucky. Abandoned by their mother when they were in their early teens, they supported themselves as strippers and abused drugs.

Before they aged out of foster care, she said, "they never would have said they wanted that. ... When you have no choice, your only other choice is to be on the streets, you go into survival mode."

Assemblyman Dave Jones, D-Sacramento, said he and Sen. Carole Migden, D-San Francisco, were introducing legislation to enact the transitional stipend program.