

Transition from Foster System to Adulthood

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In a lot of ways, the Commonwealth of Virginia is ahead of other states in the country when it comes to our Foster Care system. Virginia has the lowest rate of youth in formal foster care, which is amazing. There have been many positive changes made to our system overall in the past 10+ years. Not only is the percentage of children in traditional foster care (as opposed to those who are cared for by a family member) on the decline and the lowest in the country, but the number of children who are permanently placed with families is steadily on the rise.

Unfortunately, that's the good news.

The bad news is, despite all of this Virginia still has a long way to go when it comes to connecting older youth to permanent family homes before they "age out" of care. 21.2% of children in foster care age out of the system, which is among the highest rates in the country. Likewise, the average wait time between termination of rights of the original parent/guardian of a child and the finalization of adoption is 16.2 months; the third longest wait time in the country.

Foster care is meant to be a temporary solution when children have to be removed from birth family homes for issues endangering their health and/or safety. Unfortunately, when parental rights are terminated and children cannot be reunited with their families or are not adopted, children can remain in foster care until they reach the age of 18.

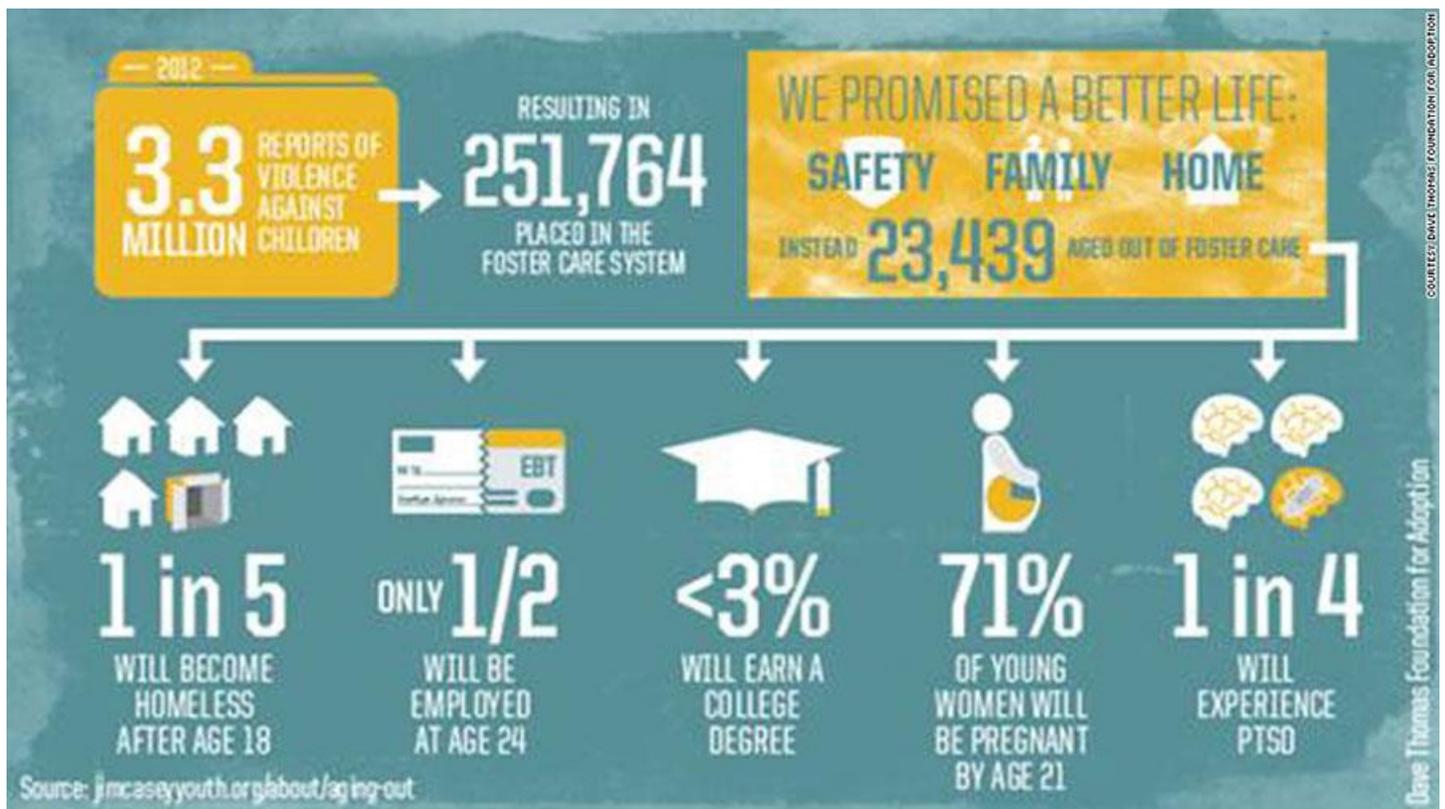
In recent years, there has been a push federally to extend the age when children lose foster care benefits from 18 to 21. In 2014, this program was approved for the state. Unfortunately extending care is expensive and funding is regularly denied for these programs in favor of other priorities.

One proposed program is "Fostering Futures," a program that is funded in part by the state and in part by the federal government. This program would help provide housing for 18-21 year olds who have aged out of foster care. 23 other states have implemented similar programs and have seen success in keeping youth in this demographic enrolled in school, employed, and housed.

A similar program has been created through collaboration between Children's Home Society of Virginia and the Better Housing Coalition. This initiative provides young adults ages 18 to 25 who have aged out of Virginia's foster care system with access to safe, affordable housing, case managements, trauma counseling, mentoring and support networks. The initiative also provides access to basic needs like transportation, internet, a living expense stipend, and life skills training.

One in four of those children who age out of the foster care system end up in jail within two years of aging out of the system. One in five end up homeless. Unfortunately, statistics on youth adopted at older ages compared to those who age out of foster care is not easily available however it is clear that those who age out of the system without a strong support network are at a higher risk for ending up in jail or homeless. Most young adults in the United States receive some sort of support from their families until the age of 26, with state support for those who age out of foster care ending at age 18 makes it difficult for them to complete a college education or start a career without support.

There are many programs in place currently to help 18-25 year olds who have aged out of foster system through private agency and state governments. However, there is still a strong need to make these programs more accessible to the youth they target. There is also a strong need within the state of Virginia for advocacy for these young people and to help the state lower the percentage of older youth who age out of the system.



Resources:

<http://vaperforms.virginia.gov/indicators/healthfamily/fosterCare.php>

<https://www.theupcenter.org/get-involved/foster-a-child?gclid=CJLA6anJ0tMCFcWOfgodDOwGVQ>

<http://www.dss.virginia.gov/family/fc/index.cgi>

<http://www.vakids.org/>

<http://www.dailypress.com/news/politics/dp-nws-ga-foster-budget-20150224-story.html>

<http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/extending-foster-care-to-18.aspx>

<https://www.nacac.org/policy/statefactsheets/Virginia%20ADOPTION%20FACTS.pdf>

<http://www.vplc.org/fosteringfutures-for-youth-aging-out-of-care/>

<http://wtvr.com/2013/11/14/va-ranks-first-in-kids-aging-out-of-foster-care/>

<http://chsva.org/>