

Aging out at 21? Child welfare advocates say yes

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Child welfare advocates in Pennsylvania want the state to allow foster children to "age out" when they reach 21, instead of 18.

Federal legislation passed in 2008 provides matching funds for states to provide foster care services through age 21 for most young adults, but Pennsylvania is one of the majority of states that have not extended assistance.

At a public hearing held by state Sen. LeAnna Washington in Philadelphia Wednesday, 18-year-old Braheem Farmer testified in favor of more services for older youth.

Farmer had been in foster care for 10 years by the time he aged out in May, and he said he was wholly unprepared for living on his own.

"My whole world just shut down," Farmer said. "I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how to start off, I didn't know where to go. It was a whole lot of confusion going through my head."

Farmer had been living with his mother after leaving a former placement. When he turned 18, he said, services provided by the state were cut off, his mother left the state, and he did not know where to turn.

Currently, kids who are studying or in a treatment program can petition to stay in the system until they reach 21. Otherwise they age out at 18. Advocates say even with the support services offered, many of those young adults are not ready to live on their own then.

"Very few 18-year olds who live in supportive families really can be independent in an adult sense," said Dr. Cindy Christian, director of the Center for Child Protection and Health at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

They may work or go to college, but they are not truly on their own, she said.

"Yet, for children who are in foster care, for many of them when they turn 18 they become emancipated from the child welfare system and are expected to be independent."

Since almost half of children thirteen years and older in care in Pennsylvania live in a group home or institutional setting, they are often less prepared than average to fend for themselves.

"They're told when to wake up, they're told when to take their medication," said Justin Lee, with the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work and the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training program. "So they don't get those same opportunity that every 16- or 17- year-old gets to hang out with their friends, to do extra-curricular activities. They don't have those age-appropriate freedoms to learn and to make mistakes which ultimately help them be successful in adulthood."

A bill that would allow more 18- to 21-year-olds to opt to remain in the system is currently in committee in the state Legislature.

As of July, 13 states and the District of Columbia had extended services to 18- to 21-year-olds under the 2008 federal provision.