

The Chronicle of Social Change

Bill to Extend Foster Care Benefits for Probation Youth Clears Calif. Senate Committee

By Guest Writer, April 15, 2015

By: Sawsan Morrar

The California Senate Judiciary Committee unanimously approved a bill to widen the door on extended foster care to probation-involved youth yesterday.

Senate Bill 12, introduced by Senator Jim Beall (D-San Jose) would make sure foster youth who were in a locked facility on their 18th birthday and larger numbers of youth who are involved with the probation system can access foster care benefits from age 18 to 21. Some youth who were in correctional facilities or on probation have historically been locked out of extended foster care benefits that could help them transition into adulthood.

“This will simply give them the right to have these benefits,” Beall said. “These youth slipped through the cracks. AB 12 inadvertently left the most vulnerable youth out, so we are fixing this with SB 12 and ensuring that no foster youth is left behind.”

Beall and other bill supporters grew concerned that without a revision, the current law will continue to exclude foster youth from access to money and housing. AB 12 provides transition age foster youth with over \$800 a month and housing—resources that they need as they leave foster care for the real world.

Cat McCulloch of Youth Law Center, one of the authors of SB 12, attended the hearing in support of the bill.

“This bill will be the key to adult life,” she said. “This is the population of youth that California has agreed to parent. Our role as a parent continues as they transition to adulthood.”

The bill’s passing was a victory for former foster youth Joseph Bakhit, 19, who attended the hearing on behalf of his brother.



Joseph Bakhit in Sacramento for the April 14 hearing of SB 12. Photo credit: Sawsan Morrar.

Bakhit's older brother, Terrick, missed out on receiving any benefits because he turned 18 only 24 days before he was released from a correctional facility.

Terrick stole his group home's van for a short joy ride and was subsequently arrested. He spent the next 11 months in San Diego County's Camp Barrett, and was no longer eligible for extended foster care under AB 12. Once released, Terrick spent several months living on the street without any financial support.

"This incident changed his life more than anyone could have ever imagined," Joseph Bakhit said. "I am a proud recipient of AB 12, and with assistance like this I could only imagine the difference in Terrick's outcome. Issues like these are prevented by AB 12 and other resources, but the criteria to receive them are exclusive to kids that fall under dependency status."

SB 12 was met with opposition from probation departments across California.

Rosemary Lamb McCool, deputy director of the Chief Probation Officers of California, and San Luis Obispo County Chief Probation Officer Jim Salio voiced concern that providing funding was little more than just housing and monthly checks.

"The appropriate system is the Child Welfare System," Salio said. "We've had kids in Oregon and Arkansas and we've had to fly to go see them. We support the idea of these kids receiving extended foster care, but with the appropriate services."

Salio left Senator Hannah-Beth Jackson (D-Santa Barbara) and others wondering if probation departments can handle the additional youth. But supporters were quick to point out that the revisions wouldn't create an increased financial obligation.

"It's a small population," McCulloch said. "It's arbitrary to exclude this group of kids. There is no reason to exclude them."

Exact data has never been collected but according to the Youth Law Center, there are 4,000 probation-supervised foster youth in California.

Bakhit is hopeful that foster youth who have been on probation or entered correctional facilities can now receive the critical benefits they need in order to be successful.

"I know this bill is the key needed to unlock the resources for those who it is meant for, because it is for those who need it the most," he said. "Terrick is proud that his story can make a difference. I think it's great we are helping to set better laws, and a better framework so that future foster youth won't have to deal with the issues Terrick did."

Sawsan Morrar is a freelance journalist based in Sacramento, and was one of the first participants in the Journalism for Social Change Massive Online Open Course.