

Foster youth struggle to find 'home'

By **Tiffany Griffin**
WSBT-TV Report

While most 18-year-olds are graduating from high school and preparing for college, some are leaving foster care and preparing for a life on their own.

Foster care is a process that leads to a permanent home for the child. But what if the child is never reunited with their family? And what if that child is never adopted?

According to the Child Welfare League of America, more than a half a million children live in foster care in the United States and this year, more than 20,000 will age-out of the program. If a foster youth is not adopted by the time they are 18 years old, they are released from the program and are no longer under the care of the state — they are forced to live on their own.

Thomas Hudson, now 25, was once a foster youth who was forced out of the system to live on his own.

“I didn’t know what to do when I left the [foster care] system,” Hudson told WSBT. “I felt like I had just been pushed off a cliff.”

“I went through a lot when I was at home with my mom. When we were separated I had to resort to doing a lot of bad things I never thought I would do,” said Hudson.

Thomas’ story is symbolic to that of many foster youth who go through the system. Although each child has a different experience, many of them struggle to find “home.”

Public Orphanages — now group homes — are scarce throughout mid-sized cities such as South Bend. Even in Chicago, it was hard for Hudson to find help.

“I didn’t know where to go. Where I grew up, I didn’t know of a group home to go to because nobody told me...but I wouldn’t want to go there anyway. I wanted to be on my own and...I think I had too much pride to let someone else take care of me,” said Hudson.

Officials from the Berrien County Family Independence Agency say there are anywhere from 300 to 500 foster youth in the system throughout Berrien County at any given time. However, there are only about 120 foster homes. This leaves many children without a shelter or roof over their head.

Hudson says that many foster youth are unaware of the places they can go in their community.

“There might be churches or Christian homes that help with housing foster youth. But that is the problem...nobody was there to tell me where I could go,” said Hudson.

Where do they go?

Most aged-out foster youth end up with friends, living on their own in poverty — and in many cases — on the streets.

But thanks to an 8-year-old nationwide program, they have help. The John C. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program — created in 1999 — doubles funding to states to increase independent living programs. The Opportunity Passport program through the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is just one program that benefited from the funding increase.

Opportunity Passport was piloted in Detroit, Michigan along with 10 additional Michigan counties. The program extends support to aged-out foster youth including debit account assistance, an individual development account and community resources.

According to the [Jim Casey informational web site](#), the John C. Chaffee Program also extends Medicaid for former foster youths until they reach the age of 21.

Although these programs exist, Hudson says that foster youth would have a difficult time adjusting.

“Even when I knew about a program I could attend, how do I get there? What if it’s across town, or even across the state? Where will I live? How will I eat? Most of the time, I felt invisible...it’s just a different world for us.”

Foster care by numbers

From the Michigan Department of Human Services — Michigan alone has nearly 19,000 children in foster care with over 1,600 youth will leave the foster care system. Of those who age-out this year, one out of every three will not have health insurance; 1/3 will live at or below poverty level; more than half will be unemployed and 50% will become homeless. The state of Indiana holds nearly 10,000 foster youth at a time.

Michigan ranks among the top five states with youth emancipating from the foster care system each year. Indiana is much lower.