

LEAVING CARE

THE STORY

Ben had to leave his foster home. In the meantime he was trying to set up arrangements for extended care and maintenance. He traveled everyday to school, which took him an hour each way from the shelter that he was living in. He was unable to access extended care and maintenance support as well as financial assistance to set up an apartment because he did not have a permanent address. But you can't set up an apartment without rent and many landlords won't rent to youth who receive money from the child welfare system or to young people between the ages of 16-18. He then got a part-time job, continued his schooling but was repeatedly denied extended care and maintenance services because he was living in a shelter. How does he end the cycle of living in the shelter without assistance at 17.

Youth approaching the age of majority must prepare for emancipation from care.

A normally disruptive period in the lives of all young people is made even more disruptive for youth in the process of leaving care. All formal support networks are dismantled with termination of care: the result is added instability during a period of fast-paced changes. The young person must leave the group home or institution regardless of how long he/she has called it "home". Foster care is also terminated; the foster parents are no longer paid and the individual is very often asked, in fact expected, to leave as well. Without the financial assistance of children's aid society or social services, most foster parents are economically unable to maintain the fostered individual past the age of majority. (p. 54, *To Be On Our Own*)

Youth who are at the age of majority without extended care and maintenance are symbolically and literally dumped out of the system. Many youth have

fears and anxieties over their futures with a lack of life skills and independence training. Also lacking financial and emotional support, the road can be long and winding. In fact being able to make it through high school to be able to consider post-secondary education or training is extremely difficult. A more long-term plan of financial and emotional support is imperative. The educational needs of youth cannot be effectively separated from their personal and social needs. (p. 3, *Who Will Teach Me To Learn?*)

Young people's ability to make mistakes and discover their own strengths and weaknesses can be hampered by strict rules and regulations that look for reasons to have young people prematurely emancipated from care. The role of social workers, foster parents and others involved in that young person's life is to guide their development and assist them through the trials and tribulations of adolescence without the constant stress and worry about "being perfect".

THE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Start a financial plan to assist youth with their academic careers or long-term planning for the future, including assistance with the identification of and application for financial assistance plans like scholarships.
2. Help youth connect with positive supporters in the community as soon as they enter the child welfare system who will be there as navigate our time care and prepare to leave care.
3. Be vigilant of the skills and competencies of each individual youth and support them on whatever path they choose; demand excellence from the skills they possess and ensure opportunities to develop the skills necessary for independence.