

Life Skills In R.I.: Adolescents Learn About Life After Care By Kimberly Rodrigues Rose, M.S.W.

How old were you when you actually moved out on your own? (College Dorms and apartments don't count.) When can you honestly say you became fully responsible for yourself financially, emotionally, educationally, etc.? For most of us, that answer would be somewhere around 25 or 26. For many, that final move to independence occurs after several attempts to leave the nest; fledgling stints away at college where one may feed oneself, even hold down a part-time job for pocket money, but financially parents still carry the bulk of the financial burden and are responsible for providing health coverage and emotional respite from the trials and tribulations of early adulthood.

Kids growing up in the child welfare system do not fall into this fortunate scenario. They are plucked from their biological families for a variety of reasons (most of which, are out of their control). They are 'placed' in unfamiliar places with people they have never met, and are expected to adjust to these difficult surroundings. They are labeled *foster kid*, or *group home kid* and grow up facing insurmountable obstacles and unknown barriers.

For many years, youth fitting this description were left to languish in the 'system' only to be 'cut loose' upon reaching their 18th birthday. What an incredibly debilitating way to celebrate a milestone in the journey to adulthood! This course of action, or the lack thereof, led to many repercussions:

- Mental health issues and/or diagnosis
- Criminal Arrests and/or convictions
- Prison or jail terms
- Admittance into psychiatric hospitals
- Unplanned/unintended pregnancy
- Contraction of STD's
- Poor health or serious illnesses
- No health insurance
- High School Drop-out
- Alcoholism/Substance abuse
- Transience/homelessness
- Financial difficulties/inability to buy food or pay rent
- Disproportionately high unemployment
- No access to transportation

Research on these issues was compiled, studies were completed, reports were given, but little action was taken to address the issue of our failure to nurture and prepare the youth that the State's took custody of. In the mid 1980's this finally changed, when the Federal Government took steps to make positive change and an independent living program was created.

In an effort to combat the bleak picture painted for the youth in the child welfare system, Rhode Island Senator John H. Chafee took a keen interest in this area and came to be a champion to the vulnerable youth growing up in state care. Senator Chafee pushed for larger and stronger 'safety nets' for our young people. In 1999, Federal monies were earmarked specifically for youth on the verge of independence. Previously, when the youth reached their 18th birthday, the money stopped and so did the care. Emphasis was now placed on preparing youth for transition and emancipation from the child welfare system.

After approving a nationally recognized independent living curriculum the Rhode Island the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) started contracting with human service agencies to provide these age-appropriate services and trainings to teenagers sixteen and older. In November, 2001, the Rhode Island Council of Resource Providers for Children, Youth and Families (RICORP), a membership organization of 38 agencies serving and providing a unified voice for children and their families, contracted with DCYF to provide a life skills program.

RICORP took this new venture very seriously and purchased and dedicated a separate building, the John Chafee Life Skills Center for Adolescents. This new site was dedicated solely to the needs of adolescents. Any youth, 16 and older living in out-of-home care and meeting the minimum criteria for behavior management is invited to attend the Life Skills Training Program.

Each life skills group meets twice weekly for 16 weeks, for a total of 100 hour of training. The program helps prepare and equip these young people for their adult life after State care.

Topics covered include:

- Banking and money management
- Job seeking and keeping skills
- Food management and cooking
- Interpersonal and social skills
- Relationship building
- Healthcare and personal hygiene
- Community Resources
- Car purchasing, repairs and insurance
- Sexuality and parenting issues
- Legal rights and responsibilities
- Independence and Safety issues
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The program, funded by the RI DCYF, includes an individualized pre and post independent living skills assessment, group and individual trainings, community field trips, guest speakers, educational videos and hands-on learning opportunities. Meals are prepared each class by the participating teens.

Those completing the program attend a class trip, participate in a graduation ceremony... complete with caps and gowns, receive a certificate of completion, independent living 'care' package and a check for \$200.00.

Once teens have completed the Life Skills Program, the graduates are eligible to participate in all monthly reunion and alumni events and may be nominated to take part in several other DCYF-funded initiatives. Some of these include: Computer Camp, Work Opportunities Unlimited, Youth Advisory Board, and First Stop.

Alumni are also eligible to take advantage of other collaborative initiatives such as: The Chafee Donation Exchange Program, Life Skills-Life Lines Newsletter, RISD Community Photography classes, Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative, Casey/UPS School to Career Partnership and several others.

Most recently, RICORP's Chafee Life Skills Center and the Rhode Island Foster Parents Association's Life Skills Program, in a collaborative effort, joined forces and have combined and streamlined all services to all teens across the continuum of care. Whether the teens live in a group home or foster home, they are entitled to receive all

available services from both agencies. This is a major coup for any teen living in Rhode Island's child welfare system.

Both agencies are very happy to report that once a teen attends the Life Skills Program, they have basically joined an 'extended family'. Youth no longer have to blow out the candles on their 18th birthday cake and simultaneously extinguish the light to their future. With the Life Skills Program, you have somewhere to go to celebrate milestone after milestone, as well as have a safety net to catch them if they fall.

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