

Assisting Emancipated Foster Youth

by Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, July 2006

It is a tough world out there and parents want the best for their children. We want them to be prepared to leave the nest, and we help them attain the necessary skills and education that will help them get a job and, hopefully, a successful career. We help with financial assistance, advice, and a loving home to come back to if at first they don't succeed at making it on their own.

Imagine how much more difficult it would be without this supportive network, and you can imagine the plight faced by foster children who become eighteen years old and "age out" of the foster care system. Referred to as "emancipated foster youth," these young adults generally have little in the way of resources to help them make their way in the world. By the time they are eighteen years of age they are no longer eligible for housing assistance and many of these emancipated foster youth eventually become homeless.

The costs of housing, health insurance, a car, gas and car insurance are daunting for anyone, but especially difficult for an eighteen year old without a support network. While getting a job has to be the number one priority to becoming independent, that goal can be easily lost in a cycle too hard to break because without a home, a shower, a bed, it's hard to go to work. That's why it is so important to provide housing for emancipated foster youth. Unfortunately, there are few programs that provide housing for this sector of our population.

It is a problem we need to solve, and one way that I think we can move forward on providing shelter for our County's emancipated foster youth is to take a page out of the book on the RAIN shelter in Camarillo. The RAIN shelter is a County sponsored year-round homeless shelter that acts as a transitional living center. It is not only a remarkable place to live with it's rural setting and clean and comfortable rooms, but the shelter also provides transportation, meals, job search assistance, enforced savings program, self sufficiency training, and parenting programs. Residents of the shelter must be drug and alcohol free and assist in daily chores. Currently there is only one emancipated foster youth at the homeless shelter, but he confirms what social service workers know: that there are many emancipated foster youth who could benefit, as he does, with a place to live. A place to call home, receive support, attend college and work, while saving money to become independent.

The Board of Supervisors shares my concern about this issue. Supervisor Steve Bennett has long championed our County's foster families, fighting for funding and programs to help them manage successfully. Supervisor Kathy Long joins me in looking for a site for a shelter that can provide emancipated foster youth a home, a family-like environment, and most especially- the support network that can help them make it on their own. I always believe that where there is a will there is a way, and with the support from the County, in partnership with non-profit organizations and cities, we have the ability to help these youth reach their full potential.