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# State tackles problem of foster children missing out on college

ALBION, Mich. (AP) — College student Stacey Kline was depressed and out of money, ignoring phone calls and staring at an empty refrigerator when she got a much-needed knock on her apartment door a month ago.

It was Lynda Naylor, a student services administrator at Wayne County Community College. Naylor and her husband stocked Kline's apartment in Detroit with groceries and gave the 22-year-old money for the bus.

"She was the first person to believe in me," says Kline, a victim of sexual abuse who was kicked out of a foster care home at 14 before selling drugs, working multiple jobs, living at friends' houses and bouncing around countless high schools. "They're like the family I never had."

Kline is one of the 450 teenagers who each year "age out" of Michigan's foster system when they turn 18. These teens are legal adults with neither an adoptive nor a blood-relation family to support them, financially or emotionally.

Kline hopes to beat the odds that face ex-foster children by graduating with an associate degree in counseling in June. She acknowledges she would have quit college if not for help from Naylor—who bought food and bus fare for Kline with her own money—and others. That makes Kline's story important for state officials determined to see more foster youth with college degrees.

Social workers, college representatives and key advocates met last month at a special summit in Albion to hear from Kline, other foster alumni and experts. The state wants to remove the barriers that prevent 90 percent of college-age foster kids from going to college.

The numbers are sobering. Young adults aging out of the foster system are less likely to be employed than their peers—and they're less likely to be able to afford rent or utilities. They're more likely to be homeless, have mental health problems and be incarcerated.

Seventy percent want to go to college, but just 20 percent go and only 5 percent graduate.

"They need the support of a caring adult," says Marianne Udow, director of the state Department of Human Services. "They need a permanent connection, somebody to guide them, somebody to help them make those basic decisions. Someone they can call when their car breaks down and they don't know what to do."

In a report to the state legislature advocating more

help for teens aging out of the foster system, a 45-member task force highlights higher education. One proposal would waive tuition for former foster children enrolled in Michigan's public universities and community colleges. Another goal is providing year-round housing stipends so students can tap other financial aid to help cover food, books, transportation and child care.

Udow says the challenge is more complex than just providing free tuition.

Where do ex-foster children go when dorms close for winter, spring and summer breaks? Who helps high schoolers navigate the befuddling form to apply for federal financial aid for college?

Naylor says it's not just about kids leaving the system and being told to get a job or go to school with no skill sets. They may think of themselves as "throwaways" and have low self-esteem. Having an advocate at college can be the difference between success and failure.

"We all need some help," says Naylor, noting that grown adults still get support from their parents and families.

Michigan Supreme Court Justice Maura Corrigan, a longtime advocate for foster children, says a serious problem is how often kids are moved from home to home and therefore school to school. Switching schools can bring incorrect placements and credits along with the typical uncertainty of a new school, new classes and new faces.

Kline estimates attending at least six schools since age 14.

The state wants to have education planners helping foster youth think about college, and hopes to upgrade a statewide database to reduce delays in transferring school records when those students change K-12 schools. Officials also are looking at ways to create a support system for foster youth who enroll in college.

A big concern—and a familiar one for the foster care system—is money. The state's budget deficit is forcing state departments to cut spending. There may not be support for new or expanded programs.

Udow, however, says policymakers and lawmakers must find additional resources now or watch as foster children left to fend for themselves end up in prison or on public assistance.

"We end up paying, and we end up paying much more down the road," Udow says.

## Campus housing offers college experience

BY CARISA CHAPPELL

No longer strictly commuter colleges, students living on the campus are becoming a reality for more community colleges as a growing number of two-year institutions consider student housing an important aspect of the higher education experience.

Representatives from community colleges in Minnesota and Texas spoke last month at the annual American Association of Community Colleges convention in Tampa, Fla., about expanding residential housing for their students. Both states have colleges that already added student living quarters for specific students.

Frank Phillips College (FPC) in Texas recently opened a new student living facility to join its two other student housing buildings. The new dorm, however, will specifically house first-generation, underprepared and low income students. College officials said the building has an environment focused on promoting academic success with opportunities to create learning communities.

FPC President Herbert Swender said that the college renovated an older campus building to create the new student dorm.

"It's a good deal for students; the housing provides access and affordability. "Living on campus is part of the comprehensive learning experience, not just go to school and leave," Swender said.

Itasca Community College in Minnesota offers housing specifically for its engineering students, a cohort of students who spend a lot of time on campus working on projects and in labs.

"We didn't want to kick them off of the campus," said Itasca Provost Mike Johnson.

The dorm, which houses 75 students, opened in 2005. It is funded through special grants for the college's engineering program. Twelve more dorm rooms are available on a separate floor of the college's engineering building. Students in both facilities have access to computers and study space all day.

Since the college began offering student housing, Johnson said college officials have noticed an improvement in the numbers of students completing their degree within two years.

"Our retention rate is what we built the program on," he said.

Other colleges are taking notice. Illinois lawmakers are trying to pass a bill to allow community colleges to provide student housing. State law currently prohibits two-year institutions from owning on-campus homes for students.

Tom Schmidt, president of Carl Sanburg College (Illinois), believes that providing housing would help more students in Illinois attend community colleges full-time and therefore increase graduation rates.