



HUD Program Combats Homelessness Among Former Foster Youth

Irene Luo and Jan Jekielek, The Epoch Times, February 25, 2020.

Every year, over 20,000 foster youth age out of the foster care system. Around 25 percent of them become homeless within four years of exiting foster care, according to the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare (NCHCW). Others, although not homeless, might nonetheless be living day-to-day in a motel, vehicle, or with friends or relatives.

The Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) initiative, launched last year, seeks to end this pipeline from foster care to homelessness.

A group of current and former foster care youth with ACTION Ohio spent six years researching the problem and consulting housing experts to find a solution. In March 2019, they pitched their proposal to Secretary Ben Carson of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Just four months later, the FYI program was live.

“You can imagine what that’s like at the tender point in your life, not having the security of a place to call home,” Sec. Ben Carson said in an interview with The Epoch Times for the “American Thought Leaders” program. Such foster youth “can be tremendous contributors to our society, and we need to make sure that we give them a solid foundation from which to launch.”

Since the start of the program in late July, HUD has awarded over \$2.4 million in funding for FYI, which helps former foster youth cover the cost of their rent for up

to three years after they stop being supported by the foster care system. Each public housing authority can award up to 25 vouchers per year.

So far, the funding has provided housing subsidies for 497 former foster care youth across the country. The latest round of funding was announced on Feb. 6, with \$258,606 going to public housing authorities in seven states. The FYI program is available to foster youth between 18 and 23 years old who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless after aging out of the system. In addition to housing subsidies, it also provides other forms of guidance and job support to help them become self-sufficient. ‘

An Anxious Time’

Aging out is “an anxious time” said former foster youth Adaora Onuora. “There’s so many things going through your head.”

When you’re in the system, it’s easy to take housing for granted, Onuora said. But by the last year, “the social workers are kind of banging it into your head,” she said. “What are you going to do? Where can you go? What resources do you have? What family do you have?”

The FYI program is an extension of the Family Unification Program (FUP), which also helps former foster youth avoid homelessness. But FUP is only available to 280 of the approximately 3,400 total public housing authorities in America.

“It wasn’t anywhere near sufficient enough to deal with this problem,” said Sec. Carson.

After jumping through bureaucratic hoops, Onuora was fortunate to receive a housing voucher with FUP just a few weeks before her 21st birthday.

Onuora has been a vocal advocate of the FYI initiative, with the hope that the housing vouchers she was fortunate to gain access to could be universalized across America for all foster youth aging out of the system.

Jamole Callahan, a former foster youth and one of the founders of ACTION Ohio, told The Epoch Times: “Out of all the years we’ve been meeting with HUD, Secretary Carson was the first sitting secretary we physically met with.”

“He was the first one that sat down and had an honest conversation with us,” Callahan said. “As one of my sisters in care said it, we are cutting off the spigot of aging youth out into homelessness with this program,” Callahan said.

According to Ruth Anne White, Executive Director of the NCHCW and one of the main advocates for the FYI program, Sec. Carson “heard their proposal, and

essentially said, this is fundable. It's within my authority. It doesn't require action from Congress. Let's move."

"I've never seen anything move at that speed absent something like a natural disaster," said White, who has worked on affordable housing policy for two decades in DC.

When the program was originally designed, it included a requirement that participants work or attend school, but this was later removed due to criticism from poverty advocates. But the program is nonetheless built with the idea of being a stepping stone to self-sufficiency, "in a similar way that we would treat our own children," White said. "This is the only voucher that's time-limited in HUD's entire portfolio," White said.

Bipartisan Bill

While FYI makes housing vouchers far more accessible to former foster youth than before, certain limitations still remain. Only public housing authorities that are not participating in FUP can apply for the new FYI program. But unlike FYI, FUP is a competitive resource, meaning the funds may not be available to everyone and may not be available immediately when a foster child ages out of the system.

"We just kind of have to go through this limbo with the youth as they're aging out in that last year to find out whether it'll be available for them," Onuora said. If they're unlucky, they're stuck on waiting lists for years. But that gap could be closed soon with a bipartisan bill that White, Callahan, and Onuora hope will pass in Congress.

The Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act would guarantee a housing voucher for foster care youth when they age out if they demonstrate need for it. The bill unanimously passed in the House and is under consideration in the Senate.

Onuora is currently double majoring in criminal justice and communications at Bowie State University, a historically black college. After that, she plans to head to law school. "My calling is law. I want to be a politician, and I want to make changes for my community," Onuora said.