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Brown, Brown: Creating 'families for life' for foster kids

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Guest Columnists

Every month, an average of 37 teens age out of South Carolina's foster care system without being reunified with their parents or adopted. These 18-year-olds became stuck in foster-care limbo through no fault of their own, and now they have to face the world alone without the lifelong commitment of a safe and loving family to help them succeed.

Trauma and loss are exacerbated the longer children stay in foster-care limbo without knowing who their family will be or where they will live.

National research shows that former foster youth lacking "forever families" are at much greater risk of falling into poverty, educational and employment under-achievement, out-of-wedlock pregnancies and even incarceration. Consider:

- Aged-out foster youth make up at least 30 percent of the homeless population.
- 25 percent never earn a high school diploma or GED.
- 71 percent of girls become pregnant at least once before they turn 21.
- Males are four times more likely to be arrested.
- Females are 10 times more likely to be arrested.

When former foster youth become mired in these traps, taxpayers pay the price through larger welfare and Medicaid rolls, incarceration, lost wages and other significant expenses. Nationwide, these costs are estimated at \$5.7 billion annually.

To minimize the number of teens who age out, the Department of Social Services, the S.C. Foster Parent Association and other community partners are launching new initiatives that help children and youth safely leave the foster care system and join families for life. The goal is enduring child safety through positive permanency, meaning former foster children and youth are safe and thriving after being reunified with their birth parents or adopted by relatives or non-relatives.

The weighty decision about whether to reunify children with their parents or make them eligible for adoption rests with the Family Court. After listening to many voices — including DSS staff, child safety experts and guardians ad litem — judges make their decisions in the best interest of the children.

Federal officials closely oversee this lengthy process and financially penalize states if children are maltreated within six months of being reunified with parents or adopted. It takes only one report of child abuse or neglect, even an unsubstantiated report, for the federal government to take action.

Gov. Nikki Haley's administration is working to increase the number of positive permanencies by 60 percent compared to last year — and DSS is already ahead of pace. It increased adoptions by 5 percent last year, which was good but fell short of addressing the urgent needs of more than 2,000 children in long-term foster care.

To minimize long-term foster care limbo, DSS launched roundtable sessions with stakeholders that resulted in positive permanency plans being created for 670 children and youth. This contributed to 257 reunifications with parents so far and 401 adoptions in less than six months.

DSS also increases positive permanencies by providing adoptive families with financial assistance comparable to what foster parents receive, and by cutting bureaucratic red tape to streamline the adoption process.

Thanks to DSS and its community partners, life is becoming measurably better for South Carolina's foster children, as we connect them with safe, loving and supportive forever families.

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