

2007 Price Child Health and Welfare Journalism Award

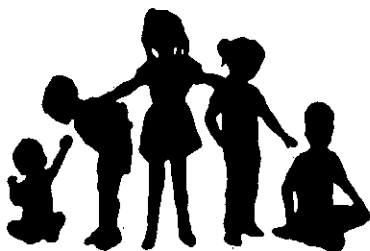
First Place (tie)

The Pasadena Weekly

"Throwaway Kids"

written by Joe Piasecki

*a five-part series chronicling the dangers and pitfalls
that await thousands of youth aging out of
the foster care system each year*



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PRICE CHILD HEALTH AND WELFARE JOURNALISM AWARDS

THROWAWAY KIDS
BY JOE PIASECKI
PASADENA WEEKLY

Judges:

Please accept this submission of the "Throwaway Kids" series in the Pasadena Weekly to the Price Child Health and Welfare Awards contest.

Per Bob Fellmeth's instructions, I have submitted one copy of the series, providing a set with originals and photocopies (as our archives are a bit lacking) from the print edition.

PDFs and other materials, including explanatory and post 2006 follow-up information, are available as needed.

Thank you,



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PW

Pasadena Weekly

HARVESTING THE TRUTH

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Henry Wilho keeps the
pressing on
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WILD IN THE STREETS

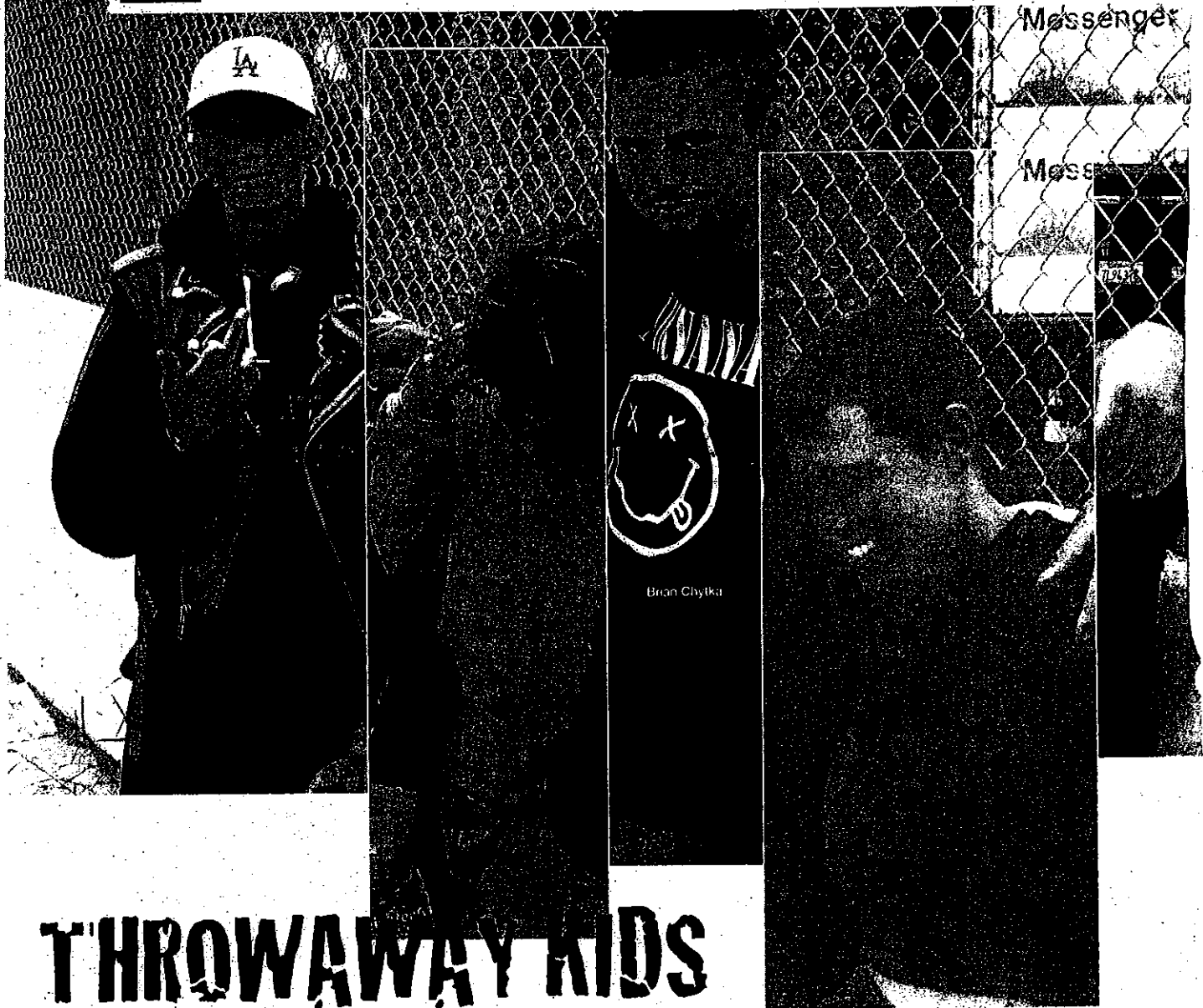
First in a Series

Danger awaits
thousands of
foster kids coming
out of county care

By Joe Piasecki



THROWAWAY KIDS>>>> FIRST IN A SERIES



THROWAWAY KIDS

Thousands of area foster children leave county care for a dangerous and desperate life on the streets

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOE PIASECKI

Except for the tape holding his ripped black boots together and a needle wound on his right arm that looks red and infected, you wouldn't know Brian Chytka is in deep trouble.

The 22-year-old is surrounded by those he calls family. There's a street-smart skater, a young punk-rocker in jeans who laughs like all of this is somehow funny, and a girl with military-short hair and a lip ring who looks healthy but *knows* she will die a heroin

addict. She won't eat the food I offer her because she feels sick from going a day without a fix. Heroin is also Chytka's drug of choice. It was his dad's, too.

Like thousands of former Los Angeles County foster youth who have left state care homeless, penniless, ready-made targets for drug dealers and sexual predators, Chytka lives wild on the streets. Anonymous victims of broken homes and of tragic neglect as wards of our overtaxed and impersonal foster care bureaucracy, they have become LA's throwaway kids.

Every day in Hollywood, youth who have recently become homeless visit My Friend's

Place, one of only a few charities offering drug and psychological counseling, showers, food, even haircuts to people under 25. It was near here that I found Chytka, one of only a few young people actually willing to tell their stories, and his friends carrying their food around in a plastic bag one afternoon in May.

Half of the kids who go to My Friend's Place have been in foster care — more than 700, according to David Brinkman, the center's executive director. All too commonly, he said, "Foster parents drop their kids off at our door into homelessness."

Brinkman's figures for those troubled

youth who find their way to Hollywood are actually deceptively low when it comes to telling the fates of former youth countywide, according to the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles. The group says nearly one-third of foster youth — and there are more than 25,000 of them right now, according to the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) — become homeless within two years of leaving the system. Another group, the Covenant House of California, guesses that as many as half of local foster youth become homeless in six months.

LA is not alone in failing to keep its children from a life on the streets at 18.



Chanell and Danielle



Nationally, according to foster youth advocates Casey Family Programs, as many as half of former foster youth will become homeless sometime after leaving care. If nothing changes, 75,000 American kids will become homeless after leaving foster care over the next 15 years, Casey President William Bell warned members of the state Assembly last month.

Those now living on the streets and others who, thanks to a few dedicated people inside and outside the system working on their behalf, are beating the odds and living their once-broken lives back together have troubling stories to share.

Many were abused at home, bounced in and out of foster homes, struggled in school, made few if any lasting relationships and learned little about caring for themselves.

JJ, who turns 21 in June, spent the past three years sleeping under freeway bridges, in abandoned homes and in Pasadena's Central Park. She became homeless at 18 when, tired of being moved from group home to group home, she successfully fought to be emancipated from the system.

"Being out on the street, not knowing what I was going to see on the next corner, having people literally push a crack pipe in my face — I couldn't handle it," said JJ, who

entered foster care after using drugs and suffering sexual abuse at home.

JJ and the other youth in this story are identified only by their first names because they are either under 18 or fear that people knowing their pasts would affect their ability to find mainstream jobs and housing. Chytka demanded that his name be used.

Twenty-year-old Jonathan isn't homeless, but his eligibility for free county-sponsored housing in Burbank runs out in a month, and so far he's got nowhere to go. In and out of 15 different foster homes since he was 5, including one in which his foster parent didn't speak English, Jonathan says no one

noticed he couldn't read until high school. According to Casey Family Programs, 46 percent of American foster children leave the system without a high school diploma.

"The state has a long way to go before it can be declared a good parent to kids in our foster care system," said Assemblywoman Karen Bass, a Los Angeles Democrat who chairs the Assembly's Select Committee on Foster Care. Pushing a package of legislation that would extend housing, health care and other benefits to foster youth until they are as old as 24, the committee is hoping to go a long way very quickly.

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THROWAWAY KIDS

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800 DOWN — 9,200 TO GO

That society has somehow failed the kids in its care who grow up to be homeless is clear. Finding out why this is happening and, more importantly, how to fix it takes some commitment.

Money trickles down from Washington, but comes with restrictions. States make rules, too, and also disburse funds to counties. Counties, in order to deliver housing, health, education, and other services to current and former foster youth and administer these funds, have set up complex bureaucracies of departments within departments. They, in turn, subcontract to social services nonprofits, which, of course, have to meet government requirements.

And then there are the kids themselves — 90,000 in California alone, each one with a different story and a different set of needs.

LA County's foster care program is not only the largest in the United States, it's larger than the programs managing many states. But here there are fewer than 800 beds available for kids leaving foster care with nowhere to go, and all but 244 of those are operated by local nonprofits that receive some of these funds, according to DCFS Emancipation Services Director Rhelda Shabazz.

"We probably need about 10,000 beds. That would guarantee every youth who wanted it could have one," said Shabazz.

The problem? Not enough money, she said.

Of the \$18 million in federal funds her department received this year, only 30 percent, roughly \$5.4 million, can be spent on temporary "transitional" housing and rental assistance for kids growing up and leaving the system.

The rest goes toward education grants and programs that teach kids to drive, cook for themselves or understand credit and banking practices. County social services workers called independent living coordinators work with foster youth to plan services delivery several years before emancipation, and services remain available to kids until they turn 21, even when they leave the system voluntarily and come back later for help, said Shabazz.

But when it comes to housing, there are other resources available.

This year, said state Department of Social Services spokesman Michael Westin, \$8.1 million in state funding is available to counties that will provide matching funds to expand transitional housing programs. Like most other counties, LA has not put up matching funds.

Removing that requirement is just one of several goals of the Assembly Select Committee on Foster Care. A package of legislation currently wending its way through the Legislature specifically targets keeping foster youth off the streets when they leave the system. The bills have found support from both parties and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The bills would make independent living services programs mandatory for all foster youth and give them the option to stay in the system until they turn 21. Other services, like transitional housing and education grants, would remain an option to emancipated foster youth for an additional three years, until they turn 24. To better supervise services delivery, the bills would establish a state Child Welfare Council and Undersecretary of Foster Care.

"We definitely need to make some improvements with the population of youth emancipating out of care," said Bass. "The reality is kids in all areas of the world are not ready to be financially independent at 18."

For Pasadena Democratic Assemblywoman Carol Liu, also a member of the task force, the time to act is now.

"It's important we try to resolve these problems upfront while we still have control over these kids. It's a no-brainer to provide for these kids. Otherwise they wind up in our system being incarcerated or homeless," said Liu, who several years ago authored the Foster Care Bill of Rights, which guaranteed all foster youth the right to obtain services, file complaints and have access to attorneys and the courts.

According to the Children's Law Center, 20 percent of ex-foster youth in the United States will serve time behind bars within two years of leaving care.

"It's a system that does need looking at, because if we don't put the money upfront, you're going to pay for it someplace down the line. We don't want to waste more lives with something we certainly can fix," she said.

BIG PLANS

Meanwhile in Los Angeles, a push to create more transitional housing and other services for youth is underway as part of the Bring LA Home campaign, the \$100-million plan to end homelessness in the county that was designed by a blue-ribbon panel of community leaders.

Released in April, the plan calls for specific services and new housing for homeless youth, and has convened a task force to deliver that plan in July.

"We need a comprehensive, countywide approach for service planning and delivery for youth," reads the report, which cites a study in the late 1990s that found more than 60 percent of Hollywood street youth had a history of foster care.

Housing these kids, said Brinkman, is the essential first step in really helping them and should be a starting point for services.

"When you have a youth you've been working with for eight hours ... and put them on the streets at night full of pedophiles and gang-bangers and pimps looking to take advantage of this population, the next time you see them they're back in crisis again," he said.

Natalie Profant Komuro, director of policy and planning for the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, helped craft the Bring LA Home report and is optimistic that change is coming — despite facing a lack of funding handicapping her understaffed department.

"What I think is very exciting about the timing of this is the unprecedented resources available to help," she said.

Much of those resources come from nonprofits. Last year in Pasadena, the Hill-sides center for troubled youth used grant money to purchase an apartment building that now houses 28 emancipated foster youth who have entered the system as victims of abuse.

The Hill-sides Youth Moving On facility



is the first affordable housing project of its kind in LA County and is unique in that it's not just for youth. Many of the apartments in the complex are rented at market rate in order to fund the down payment for a second building.

Jeanette Mann, a member of the Pasadena City College Board of Trustees and a parishioner at All Saints Church in Pasadena, runs a program out of the church that sends donations and volunteers to organizations including My Friend's Place, Hill-sides and the Old Pasadena-based Sycamores, which helps foster youth get adopted or find permanent and loving foster homes that are monitored by the agency. They also take in foster youth who, for whatever reason, run away or get kicked out of group homes for aggressive or criminal behavior and would otherwise end up in juvenile detention.

"Lots of groups and agencies are doing good work, but they need volunteers, so we recruit volunteers," said Mann of All Saints' Foster Care Project, which boasts a

database of some 380 volunteers. Many donate to the project's Birthday Club, which sends cards and presents to hundreds of foster kids whose birthdays would otherwise go unmarked.

But it wasn't too long ago that nonprofit resources weren't as plentiful, and federal funding restrictions were so tight that local governments had their hands tied when it came to spending on youth aging out of foster care. That's when Patricia Curry, who runs a Pasadena insurance business and has served on the Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families for more than a decade, started her youth advocacy. In the early '90s, foster youth weren't on anybody's radar, she explained.

"People just really weren't aware, the amount of [independent living services] dollars was very small, and there was no transitional housing. The kids would emancipate with a big old sack on their back, pick up a Hefty bag and just walk out onto the streets," she said.

Since that time, awareness has increased, so much that a group from the nonprofit community has formed Pasadena Transitional Partners to discuss foster care issues and untangle the web of government resources for kids who come into their care.

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One of the group's members, Susan Abigale of Casey Family Programs, helps run a drop-in resource center on Green Street, one of nine such centers that have opened in the county over the past decade.

Casey's Alumni Center in Pasadena focuses on finding housing, education and employment for kids, and often helps them reconnect with the foster care system to receive any benefits for which they might be eligible.

Meanwhile, the Mental Health Services Act (2004's Proposition 63) has allowed county officials to allocate some \$14 million to foster care and transitional housing programs, money that Curry said will soon allow service workers to treat and house more street youth with mental health needs.

While kids fall to the street for a variety of reasons, many are traumatized by horrific acts of abuse and are forced to deal with untreated medical problems.

As for the homeless plan, "it is what it is," said Komura, "but there isn't any money

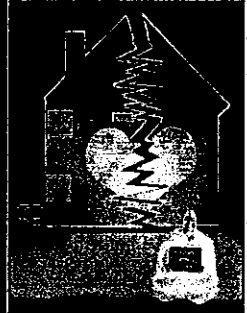
caring for yourself in a county-funded independent living classroom.

For whatever reason, many foster youth aren't benefiting from the federally funded life-skills independent living programs that go along with it, according to Human Rights Watch's Los Angeles Office, which recently conducted a study of homeless foster children in San Francisco and Hollywood.

"What they're telling me is that they

ABOUT THE ICON:

This image was created by 20-year-old Isaiah Hinnerichs, a former foster youth who lives in the San Gabriel Valley. The girl pictured in this illustration is Tiffany, a former foster youth who Hinnerichs attended Pasadena High School with and later saw living on the streets of Pasadena.



**I distinctly remember a foster
did more drugs than the pe
and that's including the foster kids.**

now saying we can launch this campaign."

What's needed, she said, is a locally driven plan not just to house kids, but to use those resources to bring more stability into their lives to allow them to find their feet.

'A FAILURE OF THE STATE'

Jonathan, the 20-year-old whose time in transitional housing is about to run out, said instability is the biggest hurdle he's faced as a foster child.

"Right after my high school graduation was pretty much the day I got kicked out of my foster home. The guy I was living with didn't want me there since they were going to stop paying him. Luckily the social worker was able to find me a place after a couple of days," he said.

Now an intern at the Casey Alumni Center in Pasadena, Jonathan counts himself lucky to have a job and a high school diploma, though he's had to put college on hold to sort out the basics of his life, like paying for food, transportation and a new place to stay.

Casey Community Programs Supervisor Marvin Carter has found that finding stability, more so than more resources, is the key to success after foster care.

"When you get that first apartment, that first job, the challenge is not getting it, it's keeping it," said Carter of those he works with. "If I had to generalize, the problem when you talk about transition-age youth is keeping things. It runs parallel to their overall life, moving from place to place. Going to work on time, calling in when you're not feeling well, the things that show we're taking responsibility we take for granted because we've had it ingrained in us since we were kids. I don't know if they didn't have it, but it's the stability and consistency of [the message], having a consistent person giving that message."

And even if there were enough of it for everybody in Jonathan's shoes, transitional housing is still only an option for two years, and you can only learn so much about

aren't getting the preparation and support they need to enter into adulthood, regardless of what part of the state they're from or when they left the system," said Human Rights Watch Children's Advocate Elizabeth Calvin, who presented a preliminary report to the Assembly Select Committee of Foster Care on May 8.

In her report, Calvin details complaints by several youth that group homes ironically went too far in treating them like a child before they were forced to leave. One said he wasn't allowed to ride the bus or get a job. Another said she had to wait to take a class on how to do such normal things. Others told Calvin they had no idea medical coverage, school tuition assistance and transitional housing were even available, or that they left transitional housing to become homeless.

"They're really describing experiences of not having been given basic tools on how to be an adult, very basic things like how to cook, budget money, rent an apartment, protect themselves from people trying to take advantage of them," said Calvin. "From the perspective of Human Rights Watch, this is a failure of the state because these children are dependent on the state for more than just food and shelter; they're dependent for their development."

'AND YOU CAN QUOTE ME'

Actually, said Shabazz, the state is doing much to make sure kids don't fall through the cracks. Sometimes the hard part is getting the kids on board.

"Unfortunately, it seems there are youth that have not received services, but I believe that's the exception, not the rule. Again, it's voluntary. Youth are offered services and many of them choose to take them," she said. "We're doing a lot of outreach."

County officials are currently sponsoring a survey of foster youth and are holding discussion-based forums to see what kids really think about what's available to them.

In order to encourage more foster youth to participate, they're offering a \$50 gift card to those who fill one out.

And some foster youth really excel in these programs. More than 100 gathered downtown last week at the Walt Disney Concert Hall to celebrate not only their high school graduation but also their scholarships for college.

"Sometimes people have the wrong impression about who foster kids are and what it means to be in the foster care system. People think the kids have done something, but they're there by circumstance and can achieve as much as any other kid," said Polly Williams, president of United Friends of the Children.

United Friends, founded in 1979 by Nancy Riordan, wife of former LA Mayor Dick Riordan, finds scholarships for foster youth in its program, offers an array of life-skills training and operates its own transitional housing program.

Fewer than one in five foster youth will go to college, and many don't graduate, said Williams. Patrice, a former foster child who

call street families. These six boys and girls as well as Chytka's group are street families, made up of youth in similar circumstances who tend to trust only each other.

And why not be wary, especially about a system as complex as each child is unique?

"It's hard to know how much of it is normal adolescent rebellion compounded with a complicated history and issues of abuse and neglect. It's never just one reason," said Lesley Helmov, policy director for the Monterey Park-based Children's Law Center, a nonprofit legal advocacy group appointed by the Los Angeles Superior Court to represent most youth in the foster care system.

Some, like Danielle, ditch the system because they no longer trust it, most likely from having bad experiences or inadequate care, said Helmov.

"I distinctly remember a foster home where the people in the house did more drugs than the people in the house that I came from, and that's including the foster kids," said Pasadena's JJ of her Tarzana

home where the people in the house people in the house that I came from,

worked with United Friends and graduated from UC Berkeley earlier this year, is one of those proud few. Separated from her siblings at a young age, she hopes to find them some day to offer support.

"Mentors in my life were guiding me and pushing me along," said Patrice. "Counselors, about anything about life ... that's one of the things foster kids need and what helped me get through this."

All of this, however, seems terribly unimportant to a group of a half-dozen African-American current and former foster youth who visited My Friend's Place just a few weeks ago. In that group were sisters Danielle, 17, and Chan'tell, 15, who said they resent being placed in foster care and just want to be left alone.

"Right now I'm kind of AWOL," said Danielle, originally from Baldwin Hills. "I ran away because they made me mad. They took me to some old lady's house and didn't know her."

"If a 17-year-old girl says she wants to be free, you should let her go, because if you keep trying to take her back to a foster care she's gonna leave. If I can't be with my family, I'd rather be alone. I don't want to be with somebody else trying to tell me what to do, and they're not my family," said Danielle, who plans to get a job when she turns 18 so she can adopt her younger sister.

Taking a cue from Danielle, Chan'tell explains that she's all about family and the system is not; that the freedom of the streets is more appealing than foster care because the people she cares about are here.

"They just need to leave us be because we're all family and we don't want to be split up, and there's no way you can split up family, anyway," she said. "Honestly, out here we take care of each other better than any foster parent could take care of us."

Brinkman explained that three out of five kids My Friend's Place serves have what the social services community has come to

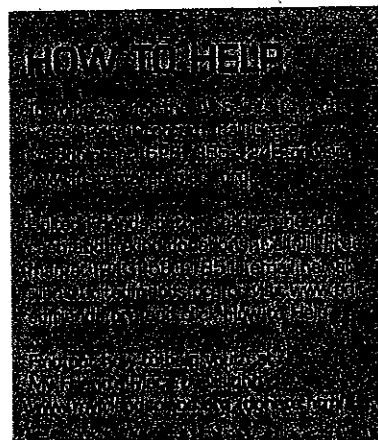
foster home five years ago.

Others, like Chytka, just haven't been given the tools to keep themselves out of trouble. And despite the positive changes that have occurred in preparing foster youth for adulthood, change has been so recent that the generation leaving care now hasn't been entirely caught up.

"The biggest challenge is establishing rapport as adults," said Brinkman of working with street youth at My Friend's Place. "Constantly they have been failed by the adults in their lives, and they are very wary of adults, period."

As if to illustrate his point, Danielle asked me to send a message to the Department of Children and Family Services: "Let the foster care system know that they can kiss my back ass — and you can quote me on that." □

Next week: More on the life of Brian Chytka, finding homeless youth on the streets of Pasadena and how some unscrupulous caregivers are selling out the futures of kids in their care.





Family business

As more foster youth fall through the cracks, some call for stronger oversight of the system to weed out unscrupulous care providers

By Joe Piasecki

It's getting worse out there, and George Lozano can see it.

As executive director of Hollywood's Covenant House youth resource center for the past seven years, Lozano has watched the streets fill up with more and more homeless kids each year.

And the more who show up, the more they have increasingly complex psychological, social and physical problems.

"Some of the mental health issues and substance abuse issues seem to be more severe than they were, let's say, 10 years ago," he said. "The numbers are increasing, at least the number of youth that we find on the streets, and what remains very constant is the great majority of those [children] have been in the foster care system."

But why, with unprecedented resources becoming available to kids leaving foster care in Los Angeles County, would the problem be getting worse?

That might have something to do with other numbers, suspects Jill Duerr Berrick, a professor with UC Berkeley's Center for Child and Youth Policy and a



Jill Duerr Berrick

member of the state's Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care. Those numbers reflect how often state licensing workers check up on some foster homes (only once every five or 10 years), how often foster children see their social workers (as little as once a month) and — with such limited oversight — how often already troubled kids in county care are neglected or abused by those who are paid to care for them.

"When you look at the data, it's a little curious. Look at the official reports of abuse in foster care and the numbers are strikingly low, that less than one percent of kids in foster care are abused in foster care [the federal standard is .57 percent]. On the other side of the coin, talk to kids in foster care or former foster youth and they will tell you that they have experienced a rather more difficult path," she said, noting a recent study in the Midwest that found that as many as one in three former foster children report having been abused or



George Lozano

neglected while in state care.

From January through September of last year, only 1.4 percent of LA County foster kids suffered substantiated maltreatment by caregivers, according to reports on file with the state Department of Social Services.

But, "What the state is reporting is probably the tip of the iceberg. There's a lot under the surface when you talk to kids individually," said Carole Shaffer, director of the San Francisco-based Youth Law Center, which has successfully sued the state and various counties numerous times for failing to adequately care for foster children.

Even for those whose needs for safety and basic care are being met, the instability that comes with being in the system presents unique challenges to their well-being, especially when it comes to educational opportunity, said George McKenna, assistant superintendent of the Pasadena Unified School District. Due to an unusually large number of foster families and group homes in the area, PUSD serves a higher percentage of foster youth than any other school district in the state.

"Their academic achievement and social adjustment is often challenged by the inconsistencies of care they get. Some homes do a very good job, others — it has a lot to do with the parent, biological or otherwise," said McKenna, who explained that area schools officials often can't find a single consistently responsible person to contact when a foster child is struggling in school.

"The standards vary widely," said Shaffer of group homes, some of which don't allow kids to make phone calls, even to their social workers.

During his tenure in Pasadena, McKenna has become aware that foster care is "a thriving business. A lot of people do very well on funding they receive for foster care," he said.

The kids feel it, too.

Ebony, a 21-year-old former John Muir High School student who became homeless when her time in county-sponsored transitional housing ran out, said with some foster parents or group home

operators, the care-giving business is all about the money.

"She wouldn't feed us for days," Ebony recalled of one foster parent in Colorado, where she stayed before coming to Pasadena to live with relatives. Though most of her caregivers weren't nearly as cold, she found no one who seemed to care, no one who realized that "This is not just a paycheck — you're going to affect our lives."

Like other youth interviewed for this series who are now seeking jobs and mainstream housing, Ebony asked to be identified only by her first name. She and others shared memories of foster parents who did not provide adequate food or clothing, failed to make sure they went to school and even indulged in drug and alcohol abuse in their presence.

As terrible as all that sounds, such stories are common among foster care system graduates from all over the country, many of whom end up in Greater Los Angeles for the sunshine, available services and a chance at a new life.

"It's a huge problem, and it's an oversight problem," said Shaffer.

SAINTS AND SINNERS

Not just the failings of a few rotten apples, inadequate foster care is a systemic failure, said Duerr Berrick.

"The ones who are doing good work I put in the category of saints," she said. However, "a significant minority of foster youth tell us the quality of care they got was very, very poor."

With California foster parents being paid about \$500 per month, per child, "It suggests some sort of disconnect with the standards of what we expect from caregivers and what we pay. In every single study of foster parents, the parents' principal complaint is insufficient support," said Duerr Berrick.

While many foster parents struggle without enough resources, state oversight of group home care is hardly enough to make sure everyone is doing a good job. Under former Gov. Gray Davis, state monitoring of licensed group homes was downgraded to about once every five years, and in some cases 10 due to backlogged caseloads. And because so many oversight visits are pre-announced, "We have higher standards for restaurants than for the quality of foster care," she has concluded.

There are people looking out, though. While the level of supervision varies for foster homes, each must contract with county officials and are checked on by social workers during scheduled monthly visits with youth, said Stu Riskin, a spokesman for the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services.

But visits by county social workers who are burdened with near-impossible caseloads just

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aren't enough to make up for a lack of regular state inspections, said Jennifer Rodriguez, legislative and police coordinator for California Youth Connection, an advocacy organization operated by former foster youth.

"Many foster youth have had the experience of knowing another youth that was reporting abuse and seeing it was meaningless, so a lot of youth don't report it, will run away from the placement, tolerate it or ask to be removed," said Rodriguez, who not only hears such things from kids but lived through it herself.

"I reported that there was abuse happening in one of my group homes and I wasn't believed," she said. "I decided from that point on that I wasn't going to use any of the systems that were in place to deal with complaints."

Weekly they need permission from their departments before speaking with reporters, preventing comment in time for this story.

DIGGING DEEPER

Then a 16-year-old crack addict who had suffered sexual abuse, JJ had a rough landing in foster care, and it wasn't long before she ran away from those who were supposed to be caring for her. In an LA-area home with seven other youth, she felt invisible.

"With the amount of kids that were there, not everybody got what they needed. Myself, I didn't get enrolled in school for three months," she said. After moving to a different home where both foster youth and foster parents openly used drugs and alcohol, she went off on her own and soon became homeless in Pasadena, where she

I wouldn't let my dad **apologize** and say he loved me or anything, right. I got on that phone and I ripped him a new asshole, and my closing words were, **'I hate your guts** you old man and I hope you fucking kill yourself, man.' And my fucking dad **killed himself** the next fucking day.

A similar thing happened to Sandy, a homeless former foster youth interviewed by Human Rights Watch for a recent report on kids leaving the system. She said she had been sexually abused in care but was afraid to report it, mostly for fear of being moved somewhere even worse.

Not that all victims are old enough to make a choice. Earlier this week, LA County's Office of Independent Review released a report blaming the beating death of a 2-year-old foster child in Alhambra on negligence by the social workers and supervisors who placed the child in the abusive home. LA County District Attorney Franco Baratta, who is prosecuting the couple charged in the death of little Sarah Chavez, would not comment on the case.

Anthony, an 18-year-old living on the streets of Hollywood, told the Weekly he ran away from a physically abusive foster home in Michigan. The only oversight of that home came from his social worker, who had such a friendly relationship with the abusive foster parent that he felt she wouldn't believe him, as he already had a reputation for misbehaving.

Thanks in part to lobbying by California Youth Connection, however, there are systems in place to help foster youth in crisis.

At both the state and county levels, a foster care ombudsman is available to hear complaints by and advocate for youth who, like Rodriguez once did, feel they have no other recourse.

Within the past year, the California Foster Care Ombudsman's Office heard 937 complaints and took more than 600 calls for information about the system from current and former foster youth, foster and biological parents and others. Of those complaints, 96 were about rights violations, 62 involved abuse and neglect of foster youth and 187 pertained to problems with placements in foster homes, according to state records.

However, foster care ombudsmen at both the state and county levels are not fully independent investigators: a few of them told the

once again was exposed to drugs, poverty and indifference.

For a crash-course in area youth homelessness, the very real aftermath of failures in the state's foster care system, catch a ride with Saul Zepeda. He's an outreach worker for Pacific Clinics' Healthy Transitions Program in Pasadena, which has connected JJ and dozens of others to housing and other much-needed services.

Zepeda spends his days combing vacant houses, parks and other places in the San Gabriel Valley offering hygiene kits, contact information for services and on-the-spot counseling for youth in crisis.

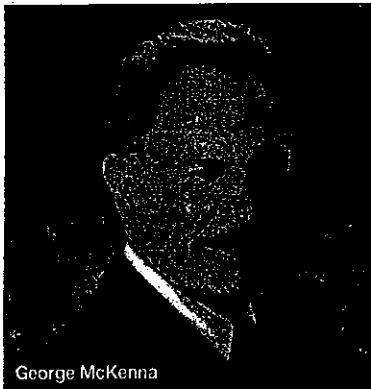
This reporter got a brief but striking tour earlier this month, guided not just by Saul but by Ebony and Queenese, an 18-year-old former foster youth who grew up in San Diego. There was a lot to learn.

Just outside of bustling Old Pasadena, about two blocks up from the Gold Line Station at Central Park, is a vacant, back-lot house where several homeless youth have sought shelter. While hosting some of this summer's hottest free concerts, the Levitt Pavilion band shell in Memorial Park is also a place under which homeless youth have been known to sleep. In the city's more economically depressed Northwest area, homeless youth are everywhere — in rundown homes with overgrown lawns, alleys, boarded-up buildings, or just walking around with nothing to do, said Zepeda.

Along the way, we pass a young man with a baby. He doesn't look homeless, but Ebony knows he is. She too had been invisibly homeless, traveling the country with her mother and siblings, squatting in vacant houses and living in hotel rooms with her increasingly mentally disturbed mother.

"There's a big population that people don't realize," said Gina Perez, director of the Healthy Transitions Program, which has delivered services to hundreds of kids and found homes for 71 homeless youth.

In 2004 and 2005, nearly half of the 200



George McKenna

kids served by the program had been in foster care, and several now live at Pacific Clinics' Hestia House, a transitional housing duplex on Orange Grove Boulevard. Plans are also in the works to open a youth recovery center in Baldwin Park to target the underserved and little understood Asian-American homeless youth of the San Gabriel Valley, she said. For now, the overwhelming majority of homeless youth served by Pacific Clinics are black and Latino.

A more common denominator, explained Zepeda, is that they find it difficult to follow through with things, to help others help them.

"They never had anybody to show them how to do things and they have a difficult time following directions. Nobody's ever sat with them and showed them how to do certain things, how to make a proper call for a job interview," he said.

Making things doubly hard, homeless youth usually try not to look homeless or in need.

"They want to be part of the young generation that appears to be doing OK, but inside they're really hurting and in need. They disguise what they're feeling so no one will know," said Zepeda.

David Brinkman, executive director of Hollywood's My Friend's Place youth drop-in resource center, said homeless kids rarely identify with homeless adults.

"They fear seeing their own reflection in that population," he said of the nearly 1,500 homeless youth who go to My Friend's Place each year, about half of whom are former foster youth, many of them victims of physical or sexual abuse.

"For those who live on the streets it is a safer environment for them than their home was," said Brinkman. "We don't have youth who come to our door because they're poor."

Not only is it difficult to engage homeless youth, it could take as long as a year in therapy before they'll talk about experiences of physical or sexual abuse at their former homes or in the streets, said Perez.

"Drug pushers or other older people sell them for sex in order to [let them] get what they need. Substance abuse is a huge, huge issue. Ninety-five percent of kids in the streets use substances," she said.

STREET PORTRAIT

Outside the Tommy's Burgers on Hollywood Boulevard, Brian Chytka, the 22-year-old whose visit to My Friend's Place began this series, shows me the red mark a heroin needle left on his arm. He wears it like a badge of honor, showing those who are willing to look at him who he is and where he's been. In a way it sums up very quickly the discussion above — the inexorable link between life in foster care and life on the streets, the connection between the numbers Duerr Berrick questions and Lozano's huddled masses.

It's also a badge Chytka would like to exchange for something better.

"I want to get sober and get off heroin. I want to get a job," he said. I said I'd try to find him some help and gave him my phone number, but it's been more than a month and he hasn't called.

For Chytka, self-destructive drug use is more than a symptom of street life. It's a big part of the reason why he's here in the first place.

"My mom and dad were hardcore dope fiends, and the state came in and intervened and took me and my little brother Chris away from my dad, but my mom just gave up on us, you know. She didn't care," said Chytka.

"They put us in a foster home ... and they were very abusive toward us and they were sexually abusive toward their son, Bubba. They tried doing that with me and my brother, but we rebelled. We broke their big-screen TV and we poked holes in their water bed. And in retaliation they literally beat my ass bloody with a switch.

"A social worker came and took us from them. They brought us to a house and the lady's name there was Vivian; she was a very, very loving, kind mother — the closest thing I ever had to a mother. My dad got us back after that. He cleaned up, got a job," said Chytka.

But then dad started doing drugs again after an abusive stepmom came into the picture, and he lost custody of the kids one day after shooting up before a hearing with a family court judge.

"That was Jan. 11, 1998. After that I was really pissed at my dad. I wouldn't even look at my dad, or every time I did I'd give him a really hateful glare, right.

"I wouldn't let my dad apologize and say he loved me or anything, right. I got on that phone and I ripped him a new asshole, and my closing words were, 'I hate your guts you old man and I hope you fucking kill yourself, man.' And my fucking dad killed himself the next fucking day," he said, a catch in his voice showing how much it still hurts.

"I was sent to juvenile hall and all these group homes where they'd tease me for crying, and I had to fight them. I said 'fuck this shit,' so I kept running away. That's how I came out to Hollywood and became a gutter punk. That's how I got introduced to heroin, due to running away from a group home. I've been on the streets ever since."

At My Friend's Place, Brinkman sends the message that drugs are the wrong way, but, privately, he understands it's not that simple.

"Who am I to pass judgment on a youth who isn't ready to get sober yet because of how desperate his future looks at the moment?" asked Brinkman, who has both buried his clients and has seen their spirits crushed when they grow into adults living on Skid Row.

"It's hard to always be optimistic about their futures," he said. □

Next week: More data shows a system in crisis, but local leaders say they will turn the tide by keeping kids out of foster care and in their homes.

HOW TO HELP:

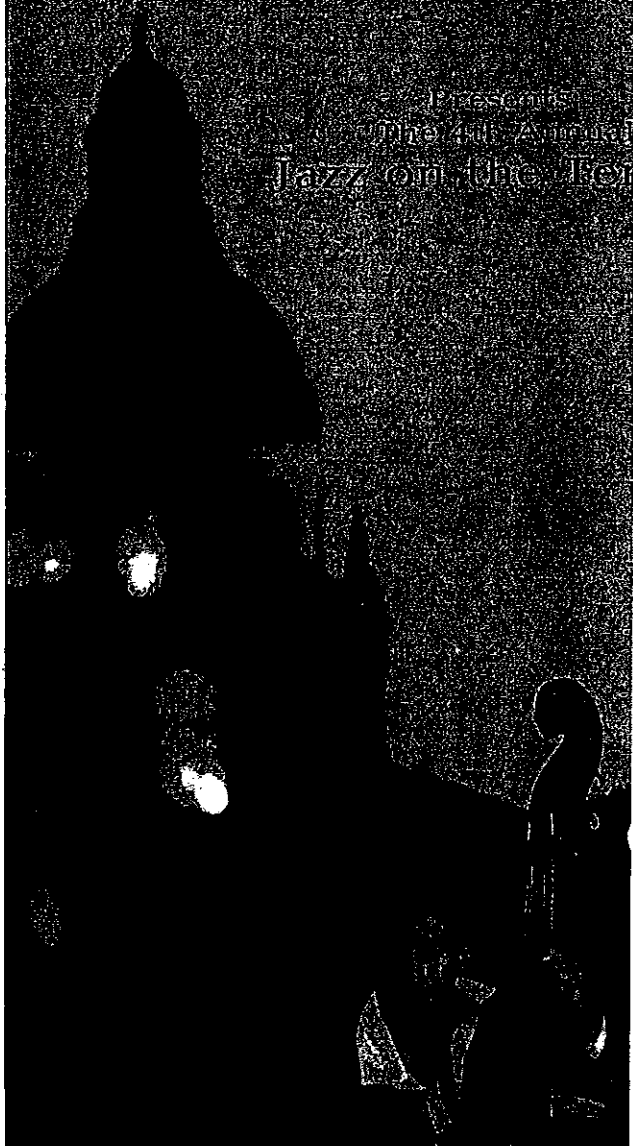
To make a donation to Covenant House California, call (866) 268-3853 or visit www.covenanthouseca.org and click Giving.

For information on how to help the Youth Law Center, call (415) 543-3379, ext. 3914, or visit www.ylc.org/help_us.php.

Call (415) 442-5060, ext. 11, or visit www.caliyouthconn.org to support California Youth Connection.

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No place like home

'A County's top foster care official wants to keep kids out of
ne of the worst things that can happen'

By Joe Plasecki

With as many as half of local foster youth becoming homeless after leaving the system without high school diplomas or as victims of undetected abuse committed by caregivers, there's something both disconcerting and reassuring about how those in charge of foster care plan to fix it.

To keep kids from slipping through the cracks of the enormous and impersonal foster care bureaucracy, Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Director David Sanders believes what needs to be done has less to do with taking better care of foster children than it does with keeping them out of the system altogether, or getting them through it quickly.

"We don't want children in foster care," said Sanders, who manages the cases of more than 22,000 children who can no longer live at home. "Youth who grow up in a safe family where they aren't being abused do much, much better; and that's what we're trying to create for everybody; that we not have children grow up in foster care. It's one of the worst things that can happen."

Since Sanders took over the department in March 2003, the number of children in county care has dropped dramatically from more than 30,000, and most kids are spending about 600 days in the system — down from 1,100 — before returning home to their families or being adopted.

And just last Wednesday, Sanders said he expects the number of youth in care and the length of time they are there to decrease even more rapidly with the recent approval by state and federal officials of a funding-restrictions waiver that will allow care workers to spend their time keeping families from breaking down.

Under the old rules, DCFS received funding only to care for those children who they removed from dangerous homes, so essentially the county was being punished for trying to keep families together.

Perhaps the biggest fan of Sanders' work is Los Angeles County Supervisor Michael Antonovich, a former teacher and longtime advocate for better conditions for foster youth. Antonovich described the 48-year-old Sanders, formerly a child psychologist, as "a breath of fresh air" in a recent telephone message left for this reporter.

"Through his leadership, children which were floundering in foster care are being adopted and being placed in permanent families that will provide them the foundation to become successful, productive citizens," said Antonovich.

But now he may be holding his breath. The morning after Sanders spoke with the Weekly, nonprofit foster youth advocates Casey Family Programs announced they had just hired Sanders to leave LA and become an executive vice president of their national headquarters in



David Sanders

Seattle. Tony Bell, a spokesman for Antonovich, said supervisors will be meeting in closed session this week to try to keep Sanders from leaving his job.

If he decides to move on, Sanders' new position will entail influencing national foster care policies, said Casey spokeswoman Megan Barrett, who would not elaborate on details of the hiring process. Sanders could not be reached.

Meanwhile, the entire state has a lot riding on what's happening in Los Angeles. As roughly one-third of California foster youth live here, progress made or lost is a significant factor in whether the state will meet federal mandates for the safety and stability of kids in foster care and finding them permanent homes.

Currently, the state is failing to meet those goals, according to an April report by the National Center for Youth Law. And if things don't change soon, according to that document, federal officials could as early as next year withhold \$60 million in foster care funds.

ALL OVER THE MAP

Even with recent improvements in Los Angeles, foster care conditions vary widely throughout the state, said Curt Child, a senior attorney with the National Center for Youth Law.

"A fundamental problem with our California [child] welfare system is we have 58 different programs running in 58 different counties, and a real lack of strong leadership at the state level to make sure all children have opportunities for safety and stability," said Child, a member of the state's Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care. "On the federal measures, we're not doing well at all."

As of earlier this year, only 13 counties are meeting a federal requirement that no more than 8 percent of kids who leave foster care

return in less than a year, all but 14 counties move kids around too frequently, only 33 counties are helping enough children become adopted and only 36 have limited abuse in foster care to .57 percent of children.

Statewide, many counties have been making improvements in these areas, but "It's not like it's a new program," said Child, who characterized recent gains as limited and very slow in coming.

The 2004 California Performance Review Report commissioned by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger — who last week approved new foster care funding with passage of the state budget — also described state foster care as a system in crisis, mainly for lack of a strong, centralized oversight body.

"The challenges in the system include confusing funding streams, seemingly inequitable foster care payment rates, lack of qualified social workers, too few foster homes and fragmented service delivery. Although various state and local agencies and thousands of dedicated individuals are working on these issues, no one has the authority to coordinate efforts, ensure accountability and resolve the problems that continue to plague California's foster children," reads the report.

Despite these concerns, Schwarzenegger cut \$3.5 million intended to target foster care deficiencies from last year's state budget, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

This year, however, Schwarzenegger has approved an \$82 million boost for foster care and child welfare concerns. In part, the money will, among other things, go toward reducing social workers' caseloads, increasing housing and educational opportunities for emancipated foster youth and hiring more adoption caseworkers, according to a statement by Assembly Select Committee on Foster Care Chair Karen Bass.

But will it be enough? Foster care

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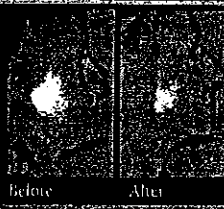
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LA street kids expose California's youth injustice system as county officials try to bring runaway kids back into the fold

Word on the street is that Brian Chytka, the 22-year-old homeless former foster youth whose story started off this series, has left Hollywood for San Francisco. There he is suffering from a staph infection and other potentially life-threatening health problems brought on by increased heroin use since speaking with the Weekly some two months ago.

"You're going to find him on the Castro. You'll see the kids sitting down panhandling. Ask for 'Slappy,' tell 'em what's going on, and they'll hook you up," said Nickel, a homeless youth in his early twenties who, because he has violated terms of his probation, wished to be identified only by his street name.

For those whose lives may involve panhandling, drug use and the occasional hustle, going by a street name lets your friends know what you're up to while keeping your government name — as many homeless youth call what's on their birth certificates — out of the ears of law enforcement. Slappy is Chytk's street name, which Nickel told me Saturday only because Chytk had spoken about this reporter to him.

Only two weeks after that interview, new troubles started for Chytka, who earlier had described turning 18 at a state mental health facility where he had been placed by a county probation officer for reasons he did not state. On May 7, Chytka was arrested by Los Angeles police and charged with a misdemeanor for being under the influence of alcohol or drugs but was soon released, according to the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's Inmate Information Center and Deputy Ignacio Mora.

Nickel's friend Angel, who also expressed worry about Chytka's condition, is 17 and has lived on the streets for three years. At age 10 she began running away from foster care group homes and wound up spending nine months in a Sacramento-area juvenile hall.

Like Chytka and many of the other homeless youth who haunt Hollywood Boulevard, the day she entered the juvenile justice system was likely also the day she lost her chance for free housing and other benefits that foster youth are entitled to receive after they turn 18.

"A young person who may come into conflict with the law, he does six months, he gets out and doesn't have health benefits or money for housing or money for school. You can't get student loans or public housing — you're just denied, which is absolutely absurd," said Jakada Imani, program director for Books not Bars, a project of the Oakland-based Ella Baker Center for Human Rights.

After reading Chytka's story, an employee of the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services, DCFS, who wished



AT HOME ON THE STREET: Brian Chytka strikes a pose near the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Bronson Avenue.

to remain anonymous called this newspaper to take exception to our portrayal of Chytka as a casualty of the county's foster care system.

Although Chytko was in foster care, said the caller, he left the system under probation from the juvenile justice system, effectively cut off from the benefits that are normally available to emancipated foster youth.

Such a cruel twist of fate for already troubled youth has been the norm for many foster kids who are arrested for drug use and other crimes, even if such treatment might go against federal law, said Youth Law Center director Carole Shaufler.

Based on research for this story, Shauffer said she is determining whether to file a lawsuit against the state for not extending job training, education funding and transitional housing to foster youth after they leave juvenile halls. While regulations until recently prohibited many correctional facilities from receiving federal funding to extend such services to kids in their care, she believes formerly jailed youth should be considered re-eligible after they are released.

"Even though that's what they do [cut kids out from foster care services], I'm not sure that it's legal," said Shauffer. "Nobody understands this well."

Imani estimates that between 40 and 50 percent of kids in juvenile halls and California Youth Authority prisons have come directly out of foster homes.

Meanwhile, the Los Angeles County Probation Department has yet to fully implement legislation signed into law more than a year ago that would prevent foster youth in trouble with the law from losing their benefits, according to the Web site for the Judicial Council of California.

Spokespeople for that department did not return calls by press time, but according to a May 12

memo sent by the state Department of Social Services to county welfare directors and chief probation officers, foster youth can now retain dual status between the criminal justice and foster care systems to keep their access to services provided under the federal Welfare and Institutions Code.

Prior to the passage of Assembly Bill 129, authored by San Jose Democrat Rebecca Cohn and signed into law in September 2004, concurrent jurisdiction was prohibited, according to the document. Now, if all the right paperwork is filled out, some probation youth can receive foster care services, it reads.


But this may be too late for Chytka.

"Slappy needs medical attention," said Nickel, who has been living on the streets since he was kicked out of his home at age 16. "He was at the hospital — disappeared for a couple of days, [I] thought he was in jail, and he just showed up. And he had this cane with him; he was all fucked up. Everyone's like, 'Slappy, go back to the hospital,' and he's like, 'No, they took me off my methadone and I'm sick.' So he's out panhandling and shit and doing his other little hustles because the doctor's a dick and took him off his methadone."

Despite the advantages that come with being in foster care, Angel said it has been easier for her to be known as a lawbreaker than a foster kid.

"I used to tell a lot of people I was in foster care and, you know, they would distance themselves from you. I tell people I'm on probation; they're cool. It's like foster care is something totally different, like they don't know how to handle it. And it's kinda sad, because it's not our fault at all that we're in foster care, not our fault at all. My mom blamed me all the time that I

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BEEN THERE: Charles, a Los Angeles foster youth and scholarship recipient, speaks with Antwone Fisher at Pasadena City College.

continued from page 11

was in foster care. But I wasn't the one beating me up," she said.

Perhaps those words say something about the mindset of the 450 foster kids who as of July 5 have run away from foster care placements, according to records provided by the office of LA County Supervisor Don Knabe.

Most runaways, reads a memo by DCFS Director David Sanders to LA County supervisors, are girls ages 14-17, 56 percent of whom are Hispanic. Nearly 80 percent ran away from foster or group homes, compared to 20 percent who disappeared from relatives' homes, where more and more county foster kids are being placed under Sanders' leadership.

Praised by Los Angeles County Supervisor Mike Antonovich for implementing effective reforms within the foster care system, Sanders decided Wednesday that he will leave his job at the end of this month to take an executive position with the Seattle-based foster youth advocacy group Casey Family Programs, a spokesman for Antonovich said.

But to find out why so many youth run from foster care and determine how to keep more kids from running, county supervisors convened the Runaway Foster Youth Task Force in December after receiving reports that nearly 1,000 kids had disappeared from care.

At that time, however, the number of runaways being reported was double the actual number because, until formation of the task force, many kids who repeatedly ran away only to return in a few days were being counted multiple times, said DCFS spokesman Stu Riskin.

Why kids are running away in the first place is another, more difficult question.

"It's typical for some to run out overnight or for the weekend; some we never see come back," said Charles Rich, director of La Verne's David and Margaret Home, which houses dozens of girls in the foster care system.

"Some kids have been through such a difficult time in their lives that they aren't ready to make a commitment to any program," said Rich, who explained there's nothing care providers can do to stop most kids from running away.

"If a child 14 or over got up and walked out the front door, nobody could physically restrain them. That's the way the law is: You have to talk them into coming back," said Los Angeles County Dependency Court Supervisor Judge Margaret Henry.

In order to keep kids out of the criminal justice system, judges tend to issue warrants for runaways only in extreme circumstances, according to Henry.

"So many kids have mental health issues because of abandonment or sexual abuse they have suffered and go out on the streets to self-medicate. We need them to be a good

sport long enough to get them counseling, medication or whatever they need to make them feel safe again," she said.

'STILL KIDS'

Antwone Fisher, a former homeless foster youth whose life story was the subject of the feature film "Antwone Fisher" directed by Denzel Washington, knows how hard it is for foster and probation youth who leave the system with no one in their lives to turn to for help.

"I was so afraid because I knew I didn't have anybody to fall back on. I felt like there weren't any good people in the world," he said of the time he spent living on the streets of Cleveland in the 1970s.

In late March, Fisher spoke to dozens of foster students who were preparing for a high school graduation ceremony hosted by Casey Family Programs and DCFS that would also mark their leaving care.

Though programs that offer money for education and transitional housing are today keeping many youth from a life on the streets, the deck is still stacked against foster kids leaving care, said Fisher.

"Most people don't trust teenagers. They think they're volatile, which they are, because they're unfinished people, just getting started. They look like adults sometimes, and you think they ought to know right from wrong and that there's hope and services, but they're still kids," he said.

Chato, a 17-year-old former juvenile hall inmate, looks very much like a kid, but he's been taking care of himself on the streets of Hollywood for the two years since his mother told him to leave their Santa Monica home. On Sunday night he slept outside the Pantages Theatre.

Although he was sent to juvenile hall for selling drugs and admitted to stealing food to survive immediately after his release, Chato said he no longer steals or even uses contraband, and wants to avoid trouble. In his wallet, which contained only a few dollars, he carried a picture of his young son now cared for by a teenage mother. He said he wants a job so he can someday be with his son.

"Not all squatters are high all the time, and I'm living proof of it. But we'll be sitting at the bus stop and people are afraid to take their money out. We're not going to hurt you. Let them know some of us are nice," he said.

For now, despite the danger, living on the streets ironically gives him a sense of belonging.

"I'm one of many," he said. "You feel a sense of security when you're around people of your status. They're not going to judge me, and when they run in packs, and deep, you know they're going to watch your back." □

Next week: Elected officials describe new plans for getting homeless youth off the street.

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**A RING OF
TRUTH**

Jury convicts ex-cop
of having Web sex
with teen girls

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**JUST WHO IS
T.C. BOYLE?**

'Talk Talk' draws
the line on privacy
in America

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What Now?

(Last in a Series)

By Joe Piasecki

Officials struggle to stem the growing number
of kids living on the streets of LA County

Photos by Ted Sogol

What Now?

By Joe Piasecki

Officials struggle to stem the growing number of kids living on the streets of LA County

Born into foster care 23 years ago to a drug-addicted mother and a father he's never met, Sqoll, as he prefers to be called, has lived on the streets of Los Angeles County for the past three years. Shuffled between more than 30 placements during his childhood in county care, homelessness is the most stable situation he's ever been in.

David, who is about the same age as Sqoll, left juvenile hall with a history of drug abuse and mental health issues before living on the streets of Hollywood. Though he tries to avoid contact with police, he prides himself on the tattoos he has received in jail and looks forward to occasional stays at mental health hospitals as an opportunity to meet potential girlfriends.

JJ, a 21-year-old former foster youth who was featured in earlier portions of this series, has left a temporary housing facility in the area to once again sleep in Pasadena parks and alleys. Just two weeks ago, she and a friend were panhandling near the corner of Colorado Boulevard and Fair Oaks Avenue.

Like thousands of young adults who grew up in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, Sqoll, David and JJ have no idea what the coming weeks will bring and have few, if any, realistic plans for how to get themselves out of homelessness and poverty.

Statistics compiled by Home at Last, an advocacy partnership between the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles and Occidental

College, tell the story in numbers: After they turn 18, one in five foster kids will be homeless, one in three will not have a high school diploma or GED, another third will struggle with mental health or substance abuse issues, one in four will wind up in jail and fewer than half will find a job.

Nationally, that's tens of thousands of kids who have no home, no hope and virtually no help getting through a world that seems intent on seeing them fail. And that's not even counting the kids with criminal records who, despite suffering broken homes, aren't considered foster youth and therefore are not entitled to receive most government benefits.

"When we're panhandling, some people are always screaming, 'Get a job.' It's not that fuckin' simple when you're on the streets," said Sqoll, who sleeps near Hollywood's Walk of Fame and goes by that name within the homeless community.

The belief there is no quick or easy way to help homeless youth off the streets is something — and maybe the only thing — that Sqoll and area public officials, who have essentially failed him since birth, share.

'TRIED EVERYTHING'

Numerous task forces, committees, commissions and studies have found no magic bullet for providing every homeless youth with mental health services, education, job training and a roof over his or her head.

Yet public calls for answers to this scourge of homelessness are building. In April, a blue ribbon panel of experts released recommendations related to the county supervisors' \$100 million plan for ending homelessness in the next decade, and according to the document a specific youth plan is due out later this month.

An incomplete draft copy of that report obtained by the Weekly states that county officials should better integrate services for youth while increasing the amount of housing available to them. Not that much of this is new, however, as similar recommendations came out of a June 2002 report by the California Department of Social Services.

In fact, aside from recent innovations by LA's outgoing head of foster care and an increase of funding in this year's state budget, nothing actually that new has happened for kids who have no one but the state to depend on for care.

Despite a historic lack of effective government response and a continued public desire for solutions, some say there is little more that officials can do for street youth, who carry with them a general distrust of government programs

DAVID: 23 and living on the streets.



and the psychological damage incurred from broken homes.

"There really isn't anything in public policy that can be done," said Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina, who believes government is unequipped to deal with the problem and unable to find enough nonprofit service providers that the county could fund to attack it.

"It's a tough job, and we don't do it well. For those children that want to be helped, we can create a solid pathway — not the best, but solid — so they not have as many obstacles for housing and support for school. We can do things, we have the resources; but it's really tough to become a surrogate mom, and we can't be relying on government to do that," said Molina.

"I'd be happy to turn over all of our resources to someone who could produce better outcomes than us. We've tried everything, so I can't totally blame us," Molina said.

In the meantime, she said, homeless youth "can get in line for the services we provide them, but, tragically, that's it."

CAN'T START TOO EARLY

Some say the best way to end youth homelessness is by providing better care for kids so they don't become homeless young adults. To some, this means keeping kids out of foster care altogether.

An analysis of conditions for California foster youth published by the National Center for Youth Law found that most county foster care agencies are failing to meet federal caps on abuse committed against kids in foster care, limits on the amount of time children are spending in care and restrictions on the number of times that foster children are moved around to different homes.

If things don't improve, the report warned, federal officials will likely withhold from the state as much as \$60 million in foster care funding as soon as next year.

"Improving the quality of care for a 13-year-old is going to have a much bigger impact than trying to solve his homelessness when he's 18," said Berkeley Professor Jill Duerr Berrick, a member of the state's advisory Blue Ribbon Commission on Foster Care.

Although this year's state budget has allotted millions in new funding for foster care, state supervision of foster homes is limited to one scheduled inspection every five years — not enough to guarantee safety for kids who have only one already overworked social worker looking out for them, visiting once a month, she said.

David Sanders, a foster care reformer who last week announced plans to take another job after quitting as head of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, has sought to change the system by delivering services to families before abuse

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GIO: 21 and homeless.

What Now?

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and neglect occurs in an effort to keep their children out of county care.

Since the announcement that he would take a new job in Seattle, Sanders, who as part of his strategy has helped 11,000 county foster children find refuge in relatives' homes, has not returned phone calls. But his biggest fan, Los Angeles County Supervisor Mike Antonovich, said Sanders' philosophy is not leaving town with him.

"Where families can be kept together, you work with them, and when extended family members can get involved, you work with them. And when you can't, then you do adoption," said Antonovich. "Parents need to pay attention to their children and devote time to their children. Leaving them without love and direction, they end up dysfunctional."

All Sqoll ever needed, he said, was a family.

"I knew what I wanted: a regular home with, you know, brothers and sisters and all that, but they would not give that to me. And the more I didn't get that, and with the medication and all, it just got worse," said Sqoll, who said he made several attempts at suicide during his years at the McLaren Shelter, a county group home for troubled youth that was shut down in 2003 due to allegations of widespread violence and abuse being committed by staff members.

TIME TO PAY THE RENT

But what about youth like Sqoll, who lived through the horrors of McLaren, or David or JJ, who was once sent to live with foster parents who used drugs? For them, recent improvements in care have come way too late.

What homeless youth need first and foremost, said Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne Braithwaite Burke, is a home.

"Obviously we need more transitional housing. There have been some really excellent facilities that have been built, but they don't provide for everyone," she said. "Absolutely we need more. First of all is that you have to have communities that are willing to take them, and you have to identify the funds for housing, and there's just not a lot of money for low-income housing, period."

With housing costs at record highs around the county, many see expanding government aid to private, nonprofit agencies as the only feasible way to get anything done.

"I think it has to be a public-private partnership. The most successful programs have been. You're seldom going to be able to find enough money to build anything today unless you go into some private funding source," said Burke.

For the fiscally conservative Antonovich, who has been a vocal advocate for foster youth for more than a decade and also supports greater public-private partnerships, homeless kids should be a county spending priority.

"There are different means of spending money, and the government should be doing what the people can't do for themselves," he said. "The next stage is, for those who have left foster care and have emancipated and have no support system in place, trying to reach them."

The soon-to-be-released Bring LA Home youth recommendations are, however, critical of the county's job so far in actually bringing private partners to the table.

"Currently, there is inadequate coordination between public and private agencies that provide services to runaway and homeless youth," reads the document, which also finds that the county fails to maintain accurate public records of available housing.

Molina, however, has found that any problems with public-private coordination are likely not rooted in a failure of govern-

ment, but in an alarming dearth of nonprofits actually willing to accept public money for helping homeless kids.

Both she and Burke explained that a large sum of money paid to the county by the City of Industry in lieu of providing low-income housing remains available for youth housing, but no single nonprofit youth housing provider has asked for it.

In fact, one in her East LA district recently refused a county offer of more money to build a second facility, said Molina.

"If there were a nonprofit that said, 'Give me all the money,' I guarantee we would," she said.

A SERVICES TRIUMVIRATE

It isn't clear why JJ, a survivor of sexual abuse and crack addiction, left whatever housing she had obtained. It also isn't clear why she appeared reluctant to then accept a bed at Hollywood's Covenant House that this reporter had worked to obtain for her.

Apparently, housing alone is not enough to keep often psychologically traumatized youth who distrust authority off the streets.



The majority of homeless youth in and around Pasadena have serious mental health issues, according to records kept by the nonprofit Pacific Clinics Healthy Transitions Program. Of the 289 youth served by the agency in 2004 and 2005 — a group that included JJ — more than a third had been on psychiatric medication and almost 40 percent had considered or attempted suicide. All suffered from learning disabilities or depression, anxiety, and other psychiatric disorders.

Also, more than 70 percent used alcohol and marijuana and more than 35 percent used amphetamines, according to agency reports.

When pressed about his plans for helping now-homeless former foster youth, Antonovich admitted he was behind on dealing with the issue, having been almost entirely focused on foster parenting and adoption issues for the past several years.

"What we can do, and you raise a good point — let's see what we can do with developing a protocol with the Department of Public Social Services and Mental Health for those children, the ones that are emancipated, in their early 20s, the runaway, throwaway children who are on the streets," he said.

Los Angeles City Council President Eric

Garcetti, who along with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa is pushing for a \$1 billion affordable housing bond that would bring in millions for the homeless, is already thinking along these lines.

"For a lot of these youth, they've never really had basic life-skills education," said Garcetti, who represents the section of Hollywood where most of the county's homeless youth are believed to gather.

So a solution, he said, "has to be a combination of providing services, permanent housing and education. If we're serious about not writing off young people — not throwing them away — we've got to do all three things."

On July 27, Garcetti and other members of the council's Ad Hoc Committee on Homelessness will meet at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center to discuss the plight of homeless youth and shape new policy efforts.

"Not a lot of people understand the particular needs of homeless youth. They often get lost in the shuffle," said Garcetti, who pointed out that official homeless counts don't even keep track of youth homeless numbers, something the Bring LA Home recommendations seek to change.

FORMING A BOND

Despite a perceived lack of interest in youth housing production, two major bonds that promise some hope for street kids may come to a vote as early as November.

Of the \$2.85 billion state infrastructure bond destined for the ballot, \$245 million will go toward homelessness issues, and \$50 million of that specifically toward youth housing.

If that bond passes, all \$50 million will fund transitional housing for foster youth emancipating out of care, said Richard Stapler, spokesman for state Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez, a Los Angeles Democrat.

"The speaker is committed to making a difference for these kids," said Stapler, who pointed out that the bond investment will draw additional federal funds to state foster care efforts.

But for those young people who are ineligible for post-foster care transitional housing, the Garcetti-Villaraigosa \$1 billion affordable housing bond could be a big help.

"What's different about ours from the state one is we do put in the language that 25 percent is for housing for formerly homeless people. That means homeless youth, homeless families — youth would certainly be component of it, though they are not called out," said Garcetti. "Senior housing is a very well-known and protected category, multi-family housing is one too, but we don't do much for youth. I hope that's a big policy prescription that comes out of this."

Last week, Los Angeles City Council members voted 13-0 to support the bond, which comes back for a final vote next month. If it is approved, money raised through the bond would be invested into the city's Affordable Housing Trust Fund, which Villaraigosa funds annually at \$50 million.

While Villaraigosa spokeswoman Elizabeth Kivowitz would say only that the bond was in its "development stage," she described the mayor as committed to solving youth homelessness.

"The mayor is looking closely at this homeless population, essentially kids who have no place to live and no one to support them financially or emotionally, and working to use some of the \$50 million that he has set aside ... for housing these kids," she said.



ADAM: 24 and on the streets for five years.

'START LISTENING'

In Pasadena, where affordable housing issues top public discussion and city officials have adopted their own 10-year plan to end homelessness, Mayor Bill Bogaard is not optimistic that city policymakers will be able to make significant gains in helping homeless youth anytime soon.

With the city already struggling to ensure that fees raised through its affordable housing ordinance translate into new low-income housing, it's unlikely that city money alone will be enough to do the job.

"In my observation, the needs of emancipated former foster youth are not widely recognized or frequently addressed. It's a need of our society that is simply ignored or not understood," said Bogaard. "But something can be done. I'm prepared to call attention to the council and staff the special needs of former foster youth ... so we can build awareness of that special need and respond to it while at the same time respond to the special needs of seniors, the disabilities community and people with very low incomes."

For Molina, who believes many homeless youth aren't interested in tapping the limited services that are already available to them, it's up to those in need to come into the system to obtain services.

As in any other parent-child situation, "It has to work both ways. The kid has duties and responsibilities as well."

Garcetti, however, would like to see policymakers and community and business leaders make the first move.

For Alex, who is 24 and living on the streets of Hollywood, that would mean first showing a little understanding. Along the mile-long stretch east of the opulent Hollywood and Highland mall, only the nearby homeless youth resource center My Friend's Place would refill the water bottle he carried Sunday in the oppressive heat.

Some of the worst listeners, said David, are security guards and police officers. Just a few weeks ago, he was arrested while panhandling near the mall and has received numerous tickets for riding the Metro without a ticket. Sqoll is also battling numerous tickets and fines.

Garcetti said he hopes the council's homelessness task force will result in new protocol for police officers in their dealings with homeless youth. For one thing, law enforcement could be a point of contact in directing youth to services, he said.

"They're not hardcore criminals. They flirt, some of them, with law enforcement issues, but I think the officers can be more of a help in turning their lives around than in just suppressing crime," said Garcetti.

Overall, helping already marginalized homeless youth or foster kids at risk of homelessness lead more productive lives is going to require those in power to pay better attention, said Sqoll.

"I'd say what they need to do is to start listening to the kids. That's the thing — when I was in foster care, I didn't have a voice. It's like that old saying: The customer's always right." □

Do you have an idea about how to change the lives of homeless youth? Send a letter to the paper care of kevinu@pasadenaweekly.com.

Kids A'nt Us

A local education advocate recently took to quoting Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel at the end of his postings. "The opposite of love, I have found, is not hate," so goes the famous quote, "but indifference."

Wiesel could have very well been speaking about the adults in charge of the Los Angeles County foster care system, who, as PW Deputy Editor Joe Piasecki found in an outstanding five-part investigative series on the system and the children it is supposed to be caring for, has dashed any hope many of these kids might have had for a normal life.

If county officials don't actually hate some of these children, many of whom will become homeless, penniless and prone to crime, sex and drugs before they are old enough to vote, they are certainly indifferent to their tragic plight, a preventable fate that those same officials helped to create through their incompetence, corruption, benign neglect or combinations of the three.

After more than 16,000 words, Piasecki's series left us swimming in numbers, all of which added up to the realization that citizens of Los Angeles County can lay claim to a failing foster care system. The following is but a portion of some of the disturbing facts that Piasecki found in his research.

* The Children's Law Center of Los Angeles estimates nearly one-third of foster youth will become homeless within two years of leaving the system. Another group, the Covenant House of California, guesses that as many as half of local foster youth become homeless six months after leaving care.

* Home at Last, an advocacy partnership between the Children's Law Center and Occi-

dental College, finds that at least one in three foster kids who leave county care at 18 will not have a high school diploma or GED, another third will struggle with mental health or substance abuse issues, one in four will wind up in jail, and fewer than half will find a job.

The Children's Law Center of Los Angeles estimates nearly one-third of foster youth will become homeless within two years of leaving the system.

* Of the 289 homeless youth that the Pacific Clinics Healthy Transitions Program encountered in and around Pasadena in 2004 and 2005, about half had emancipated from the Los Angeles County foster care system and all were suffering from learning disabilities or depression, anxiety and other psychiatric disorders.

* More than 70 percent of those kids used alcohol and marijuana, and more than 35 percent used amphetamines, according to Pacific Clinics reports.

In a word: deplorable.

Yes, some progress has been made, primarily by former agency head David Sanders, who drove down historically high

bad numbers across the board by using available services to keep many of these kids out of foster care in the first place, something that officials resisted for years as they went about breaking one life after another.

But now Sanders is gone, headed to Seattle where he will become an executive with Casey Family Programs, and the agency is left once again with a leadership void.

And yes, there have been promises of money for these kids who have been ignored for so long. Why, just this year, \$8.1 million in state funding was available to counties that provided matching funds to expand transitional housing programs.

But like most other counties, LA did not put up matching funds, waiting instead for state legislators to waive that expense, which happened earlier this month.

The 2004 California Performance Review Report commissioned by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger — who two weeks ago approved new foster care funding with passage of the state budget — also described state foster care as a system in crisis, mainly for lack of a strong, centralized oversight body.

We agree with the governor. The question is: Where will that leadership come from? Certainly not from the sitting crew of county officials, who have allowed our foster care system to degenerate into a halfway house for the homeless of tomorrow.

If we can't love these kids, maybe we should try actually hating them for a while. That's because, as we've seen through Piasecki's stories, there's really nothing worse than ignoring them. □

A long way from home

Despite legislative and policy gains, 2006 was another tough year for foster youth who leave state care with nothing

By Joe Plasecki

There has been no word from Brian Chytka.

A child of heroin addicts, Chytka blamed himself for his father's suicide then faced even more abuse, neglect and instability growing up in the state's foster care system before finally picking up a drug habit of his own at 22. The self-described Hollywood gutter punk has faded back into anonymity despite efforts to reach him since his story began a series on homeless youth that appeared in this newspaper in June and July.

JJ, who was also profiled in that series and had spent her 19th and 20th birthdays on the streets of Pasadena after leaving foster care, has lost touch with local social services workers and has also disappeared since that time.

Though each is uniquely heartbreaking, such stories are also tragically common, the Weekly learned during its investigation.

As many as one third of LA County's more than 20,000 foster youth are expected to become homeless soon after leaving the system, and half struggle to find employment, according to the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles. Also, reports the youth advocate group Casey Family Programs, only about 46 percent of all American foster children complete high school.

There were, however, hopeful developments over the past six months that some believe are the beginnings of a new commitment to keep kids like Brian and JJ (who asked to be identified only by her first name) away from such desperation.

In fact, Ebony — an area homeless youth who, like JJ, sought help from Pasadena's Pacific Clinics and appeared in the series — has since reconnected with relatives who took her into their home. Pacific Clinics has also received a grant to begin construction on a drop-in resource center for homeless youth in the San Gabriel Valley, said outreach worker Saul Zepeda.

At the state level, lawmakers have reversed previous cuts by increasing funding to county foster care programs by \$84 million through next June. While most of the money is going toward lowering the caseloads of social workers so they can better track at-risk youth, millions are also helping to increase the amount of transitional housing for foster kids who must leave state care at 18.

Los Angeles County foster youth may benefit the most from the state's sudden change of heart, as \$35 million in state and federal funds are now dedicated to continue a major overhaul of foster care here — progress that almost came to a screeching halt in July with the departure of then-LA County Department of Children and Family Services Director David Sanders.

Sanders, who left to join Casey

Family Programs, was in the process of retooling the agency as a major provider of child welfare services aimed at keeping families together. The idea was to keep children out of foster care altogether if possible or at least limit their stays so that, someday, no one would ever again grow up parented by the state. That kind of life, he said at the time, is "one of the worst things that can happen" to a child.

In September, the LA County Board of Supervisors found a permanent replacement for Sanders in Trish Ploehn, who had served as his deputy director and aims only to expand his reforms.

Under Ploehn's watch the number of children in LA foster homes — once more than 30,000 — has continued to decline and is now fewer than 20,500, with nearly half of those children living in a relative's home, according to county statistics.

"In the past we would keep children in care for years, sometimes growing them up and emancipating them out at 18. In my opinion, that's just simply another form of abuse," she said, decrying the department's legacy of raising children into homelessness.

Because counties receive federal funding only for the children they take out of homes, Sanders sought a waiver of these restrictions in order to pay social workers to fix families rather than separate them. Approved in concept, that waiver begins the final approval process next month, said Ploehn, and will involve cooperation with social services, mental health and juvenile justice officials when it comes to foster care.

Meanwhile, the Board of Supervisors in October funded the creation of a special Homeless and Runaway Section within Ploehn's department that will specifically target young people who are at risk of becoming homeless when they turn 18.

Part of a package initially designed to target poverty in downtown's Skid Row, the section will manage a \$5.7 million contract with the nonprofit group Beyond Shelter, which, according to newly appointed Homeless and Runaway Section head Theresa Rupel, will begin housing homeless families there next month.

Yet with all the good news, it's more than likely that many kids like Chytka and JJ will still be out in the cold for awhile — ironically for the same reason they became homeless in the first place, which is not having a family.

While Rupel is working to expand the Beyond Shelter contract from Skid Row to East

Hollywood, where most of the county's homeless youth seek services, the program at the moment is targeting families, not individuals, for free housing vouchers and other services. "Unaccompanied youth," as homeless people under 25 years old are coming to be classified by social services workers, won't be denied help but aren't



yet the primary target of this program, said Rupel.

The street kids of East Hollywood, however, were dealt a serious blow two months ago when social services agencies there were denied state mental health services funding that would have pulled 50 kids off the streets. The project, which would have combined housing with other services, was not approved because it lacked a parental component, even though the youth it targeted often have no parents to speak of, said Susan Rabinovitz, associate director of adolescent medicine for Children's Hospital of Los Angeles.

An architect of April's Bring LA Home plan to end homelessness in the county, Rabinovitz gave a frank assessment of what the past six months have meant for homeless youth.

"There hasn't been any real substantive improvement at all in their conditions and the services available to them," she said.

In fact, she pointed out, no one really knows how many there are. For only the first time in its history, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority will seek out unaccompanied youth for their annual Homeless Census when they begin work next month.

As the county begins to fully acknowledge those whose lives have been damaged in its care, Rupel understands that many don't want to give those who once took them from their homes a second chance.

"My job in the new year is to do outreach to bring a new reputation so people have a sense on the street that we're here to help, not harm," she said. □