

Governor Signs Bills to Enhance Services for Youth in Foster Care

Legislation will prepare youth to be “Ready by 21”

Dover – Surrounded by current and former youth who have experienced foster care, Governor Jack Markell signed legislation yesterday to enhance support services that will better prepare youth in foster care for adulthood. Known as the “Ready by 21” bill, [House Bill 163](#) complements Delaware’s developmentally appropriate, fully-integrated system of independent living services, housing and financial assistance available to this population. Several young adults in attendance at the bill signing helped draft the legislation.

“It is so important we allow these young people to have a direct say in decision making related to their lives,” said Governor Jack Markell. “Turning 18 can be difficult for any young adult, but for youth in foster care there are often additional hurdles they must overcome. By allowing them to identify the areas in which they need additional support and services, we’ll ensure they experience a smoother transition to adulthood.”

The issue of supporting youth who are transitioning from foster care to adulthood received national attention earlier this year when the [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative](#), joined by Governor Markell, [launched a national campaign](#) in Washington, D.C. called Success Beyond 18. The goals of that campaign mirror work already underway in Delaware: ensuring young people are not on their own at age 18; including young people in the decision-making process; and enhancing the accountability of courts and state agencies to ensure better outcomes for youth transitioning from foster care to

adulthood.

“Many youth exiting foster care don’t have the training or skills to secure housing, get a job and continue their education. They are starting out their adult lives at a huge disadvantage,” said Rep. Andria Bennett, D-Dover South, who was the bill’s prime sponsor. “By creating and offering additional supports for them, we as a state are taking our role in shaping children’s future very seriously.”

One of the key components of HB 163 is the formalization of financial assistance for youth exiting foster care. These needs-based stipends can be used for housing, bills related to housing such as electric, insurance, and transportation needs to name a few. The use of the funds will be monitored by the youth’s Independent Living (IL) services provider quarterly, and youth will be required to complete a financial literacy course. Former foster youth say the support is invaluable:

“All of these things are essential for youth to excel,” said Maggie Boone a youth advocate for the [Delaware Youth Opportunities Initiative](#), under the [Delaware Center for Justice](#), and one of the former youth in care who helped draft the bill. “Enhancing services until age 21 gives these young adults something they would have gotten if they were in a traditional living situation. It’s giving them a sense of stability and security in such a crucial time in their lives as they transition into adulthood.”

The legislation also extends the jurisdiction of Family Court to continue to review a youth’s case relative to Independent Living services after they turn 18 if the youth so chooses; it further requires the [Department of Services for Children, Youth and Their Families](#) (DSCYF) to develop, administer and implement a program that fully integrates IL services to include not only financial and housing assistance, but also, medical, employment and training, education and connections to resources. IL services have previously been available to youth

in care ages 14-18.

“Making the transition from being a teenager to adult is hard for all of us, but it can be especially tough for youth in foster care,” said Sen. Nicole Poore, D-Barb’s Farm, the lead Senate sponsor of the bill. “We all hope this makes that transition easier and gives foster children a better chance to achieve happiness and success in their adult lives.”

Delaware’s foster care system is managed by DSCYF’s Division of Family Services. Approximately 721 youth are currently in foster care in Delaware. Those eligible for IL services comprise nearly half of all youth in foster care. Acceptance of IL services is purely voluntary.

“So many of our youth have incredible potential, but they need a helping hand,” said Jennifer Ranji, cabinet secretary for DSCYF. “This bill provides a way for us to formalize our support system so that we can assist with their transition into adulthood, in a way and at a pace that is most appropriate for each individual young person.”