

Looking for Work

For former foster children, the recession hits hard.

BY ABIGAIL KRAMER

JONATHAN MERCADO made his plan when he was 11, the third time he'd been taken from his mother and the first time he realized she wasn't going to stop using drugs: As soon as he was old enough to get out of foster care, he'd find a job, get an apartment and take in his six little brothers and sisters. "That way everything would go back to normal," he says. "I would fix this and I would take care of them."

Seven years, 10 schools and at least eight foster homes later, the state of New York declared Mercado an adult. He left state care when the economy was on the brink of recession. "When it came to it," he says, "I didn't even know how I was going to take care of myself."

At the best of times, aging out of the child welfare system can be like walking off a plank. Somewhere between their 18th and 21st birthdays, former foster kids lose or relinquish their rights to state-sponsored food, clothing and shelter and head out into the world on their own. The hope is that they've been equipped with the skills and connections they'll need to stay afloat. The reality is that a huge number sink: Nationally, four years after leaving care, one-quarter of former foster kids have been homeless, just 46 percent have graduated from high school and fewer than 20 percent are self-supporting, according to 2007 data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Over the past two years, the prospects have only gotten starker. When the job market came crashing down, young people found themselves at the bottom, with employment rates plummeting by nearly 25 percent for teenagers, and nearly 11 percent among 20- to 24-year-olds. Those with the least education got hit the hardest: Between 2007 and 2009, people without a high school diploma lost jobs at nearly twice the rate of high school graduates and more than 10 times the rate of those who had finished college, according to a 2009 report by the Community Service Society.

"We used to expect young people to go on four or five interviews to get a job," says Courtney Hawkins, an associate vice president at FEGS, a not-for-profit organization which runs the Bronx-based Academy, an intensive, one-on-one education and career support program for youth aging out of foster care. "Now it's more like 10 or 12."

Jonathan Mercado ended up at The Academy after getting laid off from a night job stocking shelves at Toys "R" Us. He was 20 years old, had a GED, some college credits and a history of work experience—more than many young adults who come out of the system. But he'd filled out a month's worth of job applications without hearing anything back, and he was on the verge of losing his apartment. "I guess I would have gone into a shelter," he says. The Academy placed him in a paid internship until he found steady work as a teller at Chase Bank.

"The jobs do still exist," says Denise Hinds, the assistant executive director for residential programs at Good Shepherd Services, which houses 40 former foster kids. "They're just harder to find, and it takes a lot of work to get our young people into them. We give around-the-clock support."

But intensive services take time and money, which are in increasingly short supply. Even before the recession began, young adults fell into a sort of services black hole. "They're not really adults yet, but they're not children. From a funding point of view, nobody owns them," says Michael Zisser, the CEO of The Door, a nonprofit agency that provides career and education services to low-income youth.

The result, say advocates, is that there are not nearly enough programs for high-need, low-skilled youth—the cohort into which former foster kids are likely to fall. The city estimates that 160,000 youths between the ages of 16 and 21 are neither in school nor working in a legal job, yet the Community Service Society reports that there are only 12,000 program spots aimed at helping young adults get back into school or the work force.

Where programs do exist, advocates say, the mechanics of their funding make it nearly impossible to serve the young people with the highest needs. Nearly all of the city's youth workforce money comes through the Office of Youth and Community Development, which attaches stringent time limits and performance requirements to its service contracts. If providers can't prove that they're turning clients into earners quickly, they don't get paid. That model "is just not realistic for this population," says Zisser. "If someone comes who's 19 and has a fourth-grade reading level, you shouldn't expect that in three months they're going to get an apartment and a stable job and be making \$20 an hour."

In the past, ACS employed specialists who helped teens get into the work force, but budget cuts have forced the agency to lay off or redeploy much of the staff it hired to assist foster agencies in preparing adolescents for independent adulthood. "It makes things a lot harder," says Jarel Melendez, a youth advocate at Lawyers for Children, which represents foster kids as they age out of the system. "There used to be a centralized place that could fill in the gaps; now it's haphazard. You have a caseworker, but they've got 25 or 30 clients. They may be good and have the knowledge to help you; they may not." ❀