

André V. Chapman : Better foster care in California will mean fewer homeless, less crime

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So, what's the typical outcome for those foster youth transitioning from adolescence to independent adulthood?

The data is horrific -- 40 percent of persons living in homeless shelters are former foster children; 14 percent of youth reported being homeless at least once since leaving foster care; and 65 percent exit foster care without a place to live.

In addition to the threat of homelessness, more often they suffer from mental health and substance abuse problems and become involved in the adult prison system -- 70 percent of San Quentin inmates grew up in foster care.

It's hard enough for intact families with the resources for their young adults to watch their children leave the nest at age 18; now picture how hard it is for youth in the foster care system who have bounced around from home to home without the support of a loving family and other caring adults.

Housing 1000 recently conducted a homeless survey in 12 Bay Area cities by community volunteers who canvassed the streets and shelters from Palo Alto to Gilroy and found that among more than 943 individuals experiencing homelessness, 123 respondents reported having a history of being in foster care, with 25 respondents under 25 years of age and the youngest respondent being 18 years old. There are simply too many vulnerable youths living on our community streets.

Right now we are spending tens of millions of dollars each year to manage homelessness across our system of care without resolving the core issue: the need for more affordable and supportive housing. Hundreds of struggling former foster youth are waiting in line on the county's overburdened Transitional Housing Placement Plus housing list.

The program provides affordable housing and comprehensive supportive services for up to 24 months to help former foster care and probation youth 18 to 24 make a successful transition from foster care to independent living. Unfortunately, with only 70 housing slots available there is not enough capacity to meet the huge demand of the 300-plus youths that age out of foster care each year.

Homelessness is preventable and solvable; this is the message behind a concentrated effort to end chronic homelessness in Santa Clara County: Destination: Home -- a public-private partnership that brings together local government agencies, service providers, companies, foundations and individuals committed to ending chronic homelessness in Santa Clara County.

Destination Home is one of the partners of the Housing 1000 campaign, which is working to refocus resources on permanently housing homeless individuals and providing the support services they need to stay housed. Housing 1000 is part of a national movement called 100,000 Homes, a national effort to house 100,000 of the most vulnerable long-term homeless by 2013.

Unity Care, based in San Jose, a strength-based, family-focused, and culturally-competent youth and family development agency, has effectively delivered youth and family services for 18 years, serving more than 3,500 at-risk youth and their families annually.

Recently, local elected officials and various community leaders gathered with Unity Care staff and the community for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to announce the grand opening of a collaborative housing project with the city of San Jose, Unity Place II.

The newly renovated apartment complex built using water-saving, energy-efficient green technology provides safe, secure and affordable permanent housing for former foster youth who are now young parenting adults. This housing program will add capacity to the already limited number of housing units available to former foster youth and their families.

It's critical we end the cycle now before these emancipated youth join the already growing ranks of more than 7, 000 homeless men and women sleeping on park benches, under bridges and couch surfing on the streets of our community every night. Get involved and support service organizations that are serving homeless youth and families by volunteering your time, talents and making donations: Doing one positive thing toward ending homelessness benefits our entire community and we all win together.

ANDRÉ V. CHAPMAN is president and CEO of Unity Care Group based in San Jose. He wrote this for this newspaper.