

Foster Kids Aging Out of the System

At 21 years old, Lameika Aycock has made a promise to her one-month-old daughter. "My princess... I can't let her go through a foster care system." Lamekia is one of the 200 kids who "age out" of the Arkansas foster care system every year.

"They told me, 'Your options are up. You don't have any more resources.' They can't do anything for me," Lameika said.

Pregnant and unsure of where to turn, Lamekia reached out to Immerse Arkansas, a program that serves older and former foster youth by connecting them to existing resources and sustainable networks of support. (2) When asked what her life would look like right now without the group, Lameika let out a sigh, saying, "Wow... I probably would have been in a shelter, maybe."

According to national statistics, half of older foster care youth experience homelessness by age 21. "It's not comfortable or pretty being homeless. It doesn't feel good. You've been bounced around with no stability. It's hard to build that trust." Lameika said. At Immerse, they work to put a roof over kids' heads and earn their trust to help them transition into a new way of life.

In Arkansas, youth in foster care begin life skills training at age 14, learning skills like cooking, filling out job applications, and money management. They can continue in the program up to age 21. But often, these older kids get discouraged after multiple placements in group homes or emergency shelters, with no real family connections. They're frustrated, often developing dangerous habits or struggling with mental health issues like depression and anger. It's also a group that is hurting. They've come into the foster care system through no fault of their own and they have needs," says one adult from the program.

Many of them lack basic adult skills. After a childhood of trauma, things like making a budget or writing a resume are foreign concepts that seem silly when you've focused on survival for so long. "I was surprised at the skill and lack of skills they may have," says one adult who volunteers at Immerse.

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The top three reasons kids end up in foster care are parental substance abuse, neglect and incarceration. Of the children who age out of the system, one in three fail to graduate high school or earn a GED, one in four has given birth or fathered a child by age 21, one in three exhibit substance use disorder, and nearly one in three have been behind bars or arrested.

Lamekia knows she has a lot to learn about making a home and being a mother, but there are some questions these youths can clear up. "One person can change how a youth can feel about themselves and where they're going in life."

If trauma and neglect can create a vicious cycle, compassion and love could be what we need to foster a better future.

1 This story by Marci Manley originally appeared as part of the Arkansas Matters News segment, Working 4 You in May 2017.

2 Immerse Arkansas