



## Office of the Child Advocate

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### Expanding Services for Former Foster Youth

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Those of you who have raised children to adulthood know that whatever the law says, children are seldom "grown" when they reach age 18 or even 21. In fact, most studies show that the average child relies on parental support for several years in early adulthood and doesn't achieve self-sufficiency until around age 26.

Knowing that our children are still our responsibility even after they're old enough to vote or serve in the military, why should we think any different about our foster children?

Thankfully, the legislature and Governor Perdue have increasingly recognized over the past several years that we should continue to support our foster children even after they become young adults. Our legislature, in partnership with the federal government, several years ago began making funds available so former foster children can obtain a college or vocational diploma. That was a great start.

But, as we all know, one of the most critical needs for any young adult is health insurance. While many of us were fortunate enough to continue as "dependents" on our parents' insurance while we attended college, the approximately 400 youth who age out of foster care in Georgia each year have traditionally not had that privilege. When they left foster care at 18, these youth lost their access to Medicaid. Additionally, those foster youth who age out and enter the workforce often have taken jobs that did not provide any health coverage. If these young adults needed medical treatment or preventive care, they either did without or paid for it themselves.

For several years now, advocates have asked the state to extend Medicaid to these former foster youth. Perhaps the most impressive advocacy on this issue has come from foster and former foster youth themselves, who have banded together in a group called EmpowerMENT under the auspices of the Metro Atlanta Youth Opportunities Initiative.

This dedicated group of 300 young people, ranging in age from 14 to 26, personally lobbied legislators, agency heads, and the Governor's office. Their hard work paid off, as the Governor this week signed a fiscal year 2009 budget that will provide up to \$3 million in state and federal Medicaid funds to eligible former foster youth between the ages of 18 and 21. Governor Perdue, the Legislature, and especially this group of dedicated youth who are looking out for their peers deserve our thanks for this excellent work.

As a state, we need to continue to look out for the interests of those children who are leaving foster care for the travails and opportunities of adulthood. Statistics show that foster children who "age out" of the system are more likely to become homeless or to be incarcerated and are much less likely to obtain a good job or an education. Our state Division of Family and Children Services has excellent programs designed to equip foster youth for adulthood. Unfortunately, too many foster youth are unaware of these "independent living program" benefits or take advantage of them. A recent Georgia Budget and Policy Institute study, for example, showed that less than 50% of teens in foster care took advantage of these programs designed to prepare them for the "real world."

The EmpowerMENT youth and the child advocacy community are excited about the expansion of Medicaid benefits to former foster youth. But we must all keep working to ensure that we help teens in foster care make the transition to a responsible, productive and fulfilling adulthood. To learn more about the opportunities for and needs of teens in foster care, visit some of these resources available on the Internet:

- Georgia Budget and Policy Institute Report on Georgia's Independent Living Program:  
<http://www.atlcf.org/www/documents/gbpireport.pdf>
- Recommendations from and report about "EmpowerMENT" group: <http://www.atlcf.org/www/documents/empowerment.pdf>
- Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative report on the needs of former foster youth:  
[http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Foster\\_care\\_reform/Kids\\_are\\_Waiting\\_TimeforReform0307.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Foster_care_reform/Kids_are_Waiting_TimeforReform0307.pdf)
- Powerpoint on services for children aging out of foster care, available on at [www.gachildadvocate.org](http://www.gachildadvocate.org)

Our children don't stop being our children just because they're grown. The Governor's 2009 budget initiative to expand Medicaid recognizes that the same rule applies to our foster children. Let's work to expand that same idea to all the services we provide those children whom the people of Georgia have taken responsibility for.

*Tom Rawlings, Georgia's Child Advocate for the Protection of Children, was appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue to assure quality and efficiency in Georgia's child protective systems. The Office of Child Advocate is a resource for those interested in the welfare of our state's neglected and abused children. Tom can be reached through the OCA website at [www.gachildadvocate.org](http://www.gachildadvocate.org)*