

Easing Transitions: New L.A.

County Court Helps Prep Older Foster Youth for Adulthood

by *Jeremy Loudenback* April 6, 2016

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After the stocky youth politely greeted his attorney and Judge Margaret Henry, he told the court his days as a cook were over.

Instead, Roger,* an African-American foster youth dressed in an oversized gray t-shirt and a neat pair of jeans, said he thought driving trucks might be the job for him.

“I heard they make a lot of money,” he said. “And I want to find an occupation that I like more than cooking.”

The only problem? Roger still needs to get his driver license.

Like most 19 year-olds, Roger is searching to find his way into a career and a more stable future, but because he’s still in Los Angeles County’s foster care system, he’s required to continue attending dependency court hearings every six months until he turns 21 or opts out.

A new courtroom at the Edelman Children’s Court in Monterey Park is specifically designed to support older foster youth like Roger. It’s the first courtroom in the state to hear only cases involving “transition-age youth,” those youth between the ages of 18 and 21 who are getting ready to leave the foster care system.

Under the federal Fostering Connections to Success Act, transition-age youth are supposed to have a plan in place about where they will live, work and attend school, if possible. But many older foster youth lack these plans, putting them at higher risks of homelessness, unemployment and even incarceration.

The non-minor dependency courtroom, a collaboration between the Superior Courts, the Children’s Law Center and the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), aims to ensure that transition-age foster youth have access to supportive services that can help guide their transition to adulthood.



Judge Margaret Henry sits on the bench at Edelman Children’s Court the first day the non-minor dependency courtroom opens its doors.

On the court’s first day, Judge Henry made sure that Roger was getting the help he needed from his social worker to prepare for the driver’s license exam and asked if he was checking in regularly with his mentor.

Henry also made sure that Roger was moving forward on his plans to leave the group home where he now lives. Last month, Roger had an interview for an apartment through a transitional housing program, an opportunity to live on his own for the first time.

Access to supports like a mentor and affordable housing is a critical aspect of helping transition-age foster youth avoid struggles that last long after they've left the care of the state. Though the population is often transient and hard to track, one estimate suggested that 25 percent of former foster youth experience homelessness within two to four years after exiting foster care. Another much-cited survey of outcomes for youth after emancipation put unemployment at 51 percent for youth within four years of aging out.

In 2010, California extended benefits for foster youth from age 18 to 21 by passing the California Fostering Connections to Success Act, also known as AB 12. Under this law — and several successor bills — older California foster youth are able to receive benefits and services of extended foster care as long as they meet the eligibility requirements.

For example, youth must actively be pursuing educational or vocational opportunities, working, or have a medical condition that prevents their involvement in those activities.

About 1,100 older youth aged out of the system in Los Angeles County last year. The county currently has more than 2,400 transition-age foster youth, nearly a third of all such youth in the state. About 2,200 of them cycle through the Edelman Courthouse, according to staff at the Children's Law Center (CLC), the organization that represents children and youth in Los Angeles County's child-welfare system.

"I don't know any other place that has anything or could have anything like this because no one has our numbers," Henry said in an interview with *The Chronicle of Social Change*.

In recent years, the county's juvenile delinquency numbers have dipped sharply, while its dependency caseloads have continued to rise, leading to a shift of court resources.

"Since the budget has improved somewhat, and we were opening new courtrooms, it was the right time to think about it," Henry said.

The brainchild of Henry, the new courtroom will convene two days a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The first day saw only 18 cases, but as the new court works out the kinks, attorneys expect the court calendar to include 50 cases a day.

Most youth do not attend themselves, usually because of work or school commitments, but Henry hopes that the new courtroom will benefit those who do attend.

"There's a legal part to this court — we have to make findings every six months — but we want to make sure that [youth] have got every opportunity to be in school or employed 20 hours a week or trying to overcome barriers in order to do those things," Henry said. "If they say, 'I don't know what to do,' we've got people right there in the courtroom that can help them."

In the coming months, Henry and advocates from CLC are planning to bring together more than 40 service providers that are asking to work with this age group. One valuable resource is already in the courtroom: peer advocates from CLC. This group of former foster youth doles out advice both to youth who attend court and the attorneys who represent them.

According to Jenny Cheung-Marino, a firm director with the Children's Law Center who oversees the attorneys in the non-minor dependency court, the county's courts haven't always been helpful to youth struggling to meet the requirements of eligibility for AB 12.

"They don't want to come to court to be reprimanded," Cheung-Marino said. "We want them to come to a place that's welcoming and Cheung-Marino praised easy Henry's genial manner with youth as well as her desire to work to accommodate youth. Henry helped reschedule the court date of a 19 year-old woman who wanted to re-enter foster-care, helping her find a time in court next Thursday when she wouldn't have to miss class.

But on Tuesday, the day the new court opened its doors, one youth did not schedule another hearing.



Olivia, age 21, with her foster mother Maritza the day she emancipated from the foster care system in Los Angeles.

Maritza

Olivia, a current Los Angeles Community College (LACC) student from downtown Los Angeles, made her final appearance in front of a dependency court judge. Last week, the slight youth turned 21, marking an end to the years of regular visits to the Edelman Children's Court.

"I'm ready for the responsibilities," Olivia said to the court after Henry congratulated her and declared her case closed.

As she left the court, Henry offered Olivia a stuffed bear, a standard practice for many judges in the dependency courts. This bear was the 20th that Olivia has received as part of court hearings since she first entered the system at age 7.

She was circumspect as she stood outside the courtroom on the fifth floor of the courthouse with her foster mother.

"Being here again brings back a lot of memories, good and bad," Olivia said. "I would tell other youth not to be afraid. There are ups and downs, but nothing is impossible. That we're never alone here."