

Another view

It takes a village to help foster youths become successful adults

By Jim Beall

One of the highest callings in life is to care for children. It is instinctual for parents and the moral responsibility of a community. Even as kids grow up and come of age, they benefit from our love and support as they make the transition into their young adult lives.

As parents, we plan ahead for our children's future and work hard to help them in every way we can. We remain by their side; share the excitement of their prospects, the frustration of their obstacles and the pursuit of their dreams.

For thousands of Santa Clara County youths, life is not so kind. They are the children of the community who have no parents. They are the foster youths who become wards of the community after abuse and/or severe neglect have been substantiated by dependency court. The removal of a child from his or her family is one of the most traumatic experiences that a child can endure, regardless of the circumstances. Sadly, this trauma is often experienced again when foster youths turn 18, "age out of the system," and are no longer eligible for programs and financial assistance.

For some reason, society abandons them at this critical point in their young and fragile lives. They are expected to provide an adequate life for themselves despite the fact that many are suffering from emo-

tional trauma, have educational deficiencies and do not have the financial resources to survive on their own. Studies indicate that a significant number of these young adults end up back in more expensive systems of care, such as jail and welfare, after they emancipate. The statistics are alarming:

- 46 percent do not complete high school.
- 51 percent are unemployed.
- 40 percent are on public assistance.

Studies indicate that a significant number of these young adults who at 18 years old "age out of the system" end up in more expensive systems of care, such as jail and welfare, after they emancipate.

- Up to 40 percent are homeless.
- 20 percent are incarcerated.

No wonder they disproportionately fail. They often move from foster care to the streets, unemployed or homeless, with little hope. They step out into a highly competitive and mostly indifferent world with nowhere to turn. This situation must change.

When I became chair of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors in January, I called on my colleagues to support a program for emancipating foster youths. The board unanimously agreed to create the Foster Youth Employment Task Force — a group that met, analyzed the needs and established goals to support the some 130 youths who emancipate from our foster care system every year. The county also stepped up to the plate and hired several qualified foster youths to fill temporary entry-level jobs. They are performing well

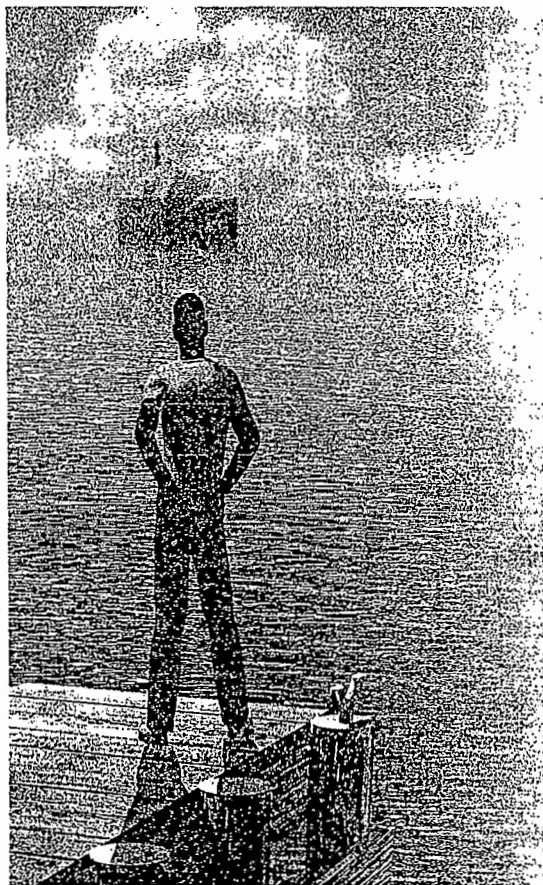
in these challenging positions.

We will continue to facilitate job placement for emancipating youths through a newly created employment unit that will prepare these young adults by providing job-placement opportunities, résumé preparation, interviewing skills and job counseling.

Additionally, the Board of Supervisors has dedicated \$318,000 to assist youths with housing costs and reduce homelessness. Eligible emancipated youths will be able to apply for rent assistance beginning late summer. It is much less expensive to help them find stable housing and launch a career than to have them end up homeless or in and out of our county jail.

The county also is collaborating with community partners and philanthropists to launch the California "Connected by 25" initiative, which will provide basic life skills, including financial guidance, educational counseling and employment training programs. We aim to create an array of services to prepare youths as they make the transition from foster care to living successful, independent and productive lives.

The county is partnering with local workforce investment boards, community colleges, school districts and employers. Our goals are clear: We need more employers to hire and mentor these young people and community colleges and universities to contribute scholarships. They are talented. Their potential is vast. They deserve the support of our entire community. Let's help them become successful adults.



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