

Foster Care Transitioning
The White House
January 29, 1999

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Foster Care Transitioning Event
Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton

The White House - East Room
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(First part of speech was cut off. The following remarks are similar to her speech as delivered, but may not be exact. Please do not quote from this section.)

I am delighted to welcome all of you to the White House. I want to say a special word of thanks to Senator Jeffords who has worked tirelessly to give all children safe places to go after school and something in life to say "yes" to.

I also want to thank Secretary Shalala for that introduction and for her extraordinary leadership on behalf of all children, especially those too often forgotten. She reminded us of how far we've come in reforming our child welfare system. And we should all be proud of those accomplishments. But today we are also gathered to talk about an issue that hasn't received the attention it deserves.

We know that we must do better by the nearly 20,000 young people who, every year, are forced to leave foster care and make it on their own. So today, I have come here to announce that the President's budget will help ensure that the end of foster care will no longer mean the end of caring for the young people it serves.

None of this would have been possible without the people in this room.

It wouldn't have been possible without my friend Tipper Gore, whose compassion and commitment have placed a national spotlight on mental illness and homelessness. Again, it wouldn't have been possible without Secretary Shalala and her staff at the Department of Health and Human Services.

It wouldn't have been possible without Terry Harrak, John Gutierrez and the other young people who walked in with Tipper and me just now. The courageous voices they have raised have educated the nation about this issue and inspired us all.

And it wouldn't have been possible without all of you who have been their biggest champions. I especially want to thank the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Child Welfare League of America, and the Casey Family Program for their deep commitment and for helping to pull this event together.

As I look across this room, it is wonderful to see researchers, advocates, and community providers from all over the country. I don't think we've ever been privileged

to host at the White House a group of people who have fought harder or longer to lift up the lives of former foster children. And all of us owe you a debt of gratitude for that.

In some ways, my own experiences with this issue started when I was a little girl. I'd ask my mother, as all children do, what it was like for her to grow up. She was never in formal foster care. But she told me about how her teen parents couldn't take care of her after she was born. How they sent her to live with her grandparents. And how, when that didn't work out, she moved in with a family and took care of their children in exchange for room and board.

My mother has often told me how grateful she is to the woman she moved in with. Because she was able to see what a real family is like. She watched what happens inside a home when children have someone to praise them when they succeed and pick them up when they fall. Someone who cares what happens to them day after day. Someone to simply love them.

Most of us remember looking forward to celebrating our 18th birthdays -- and not just because of the party. It meant we could vote. It meant we could go away to college or get a job. It meant we were becoming adults. But it didn't mean we were on our own.

But, if you ask the young people here -- or others who have aged out of foster care -- many will tell you that their 18th birthday was the start of a very tough road alone. We know young people who age out of foster care are more likely to drop out of school, land in a homeless shelter, be unemployed, come down with health problems, or have trouble getting health care.

And we know that these young people often carry with them traumatic experience of abuse and neglect, experiences of being shuffled from home to home.

More powerful than any statistic, I hope that every single elected official and every single American hears the stories of the young people here today and their peers across the country. Because there are no more powerful advocates or educators.

I hope they hear the voices of the young people here from cities such as Tucson, San Francisco and Alexandria. They carry with them stories of being homeless while trying to finish school. They come here with gratitude for all of those who reached down to lift them up. And now many are helping others to do the same.

Whenever someone wants to know why we must do more for young people aging out of foster care, I hope they'll hear the voices of Alfred Perez -- who is here -- and others active in the California Youth Connection, an extraordinary group of young men and women I had the privilege to visit with just over a year ago in Berkeley.

It was right before Thanksgiving. And, one by one, they described what it was like to leave the foster care system. One 19-year-old confessed that it was her first Thanksgiving by herself – and she didn't have anyone to call to ask how to bake a turkey. And a young man in college talked about what how it feels when the dorms close down, when other students pack up to go home for the holidays and you have absolutely no where to go.

(The following remarks represent Mrs. Clinton's speech as delivered.)

I hope that everyone who wonders why we need to do more for young people leaving foster care will hear the voices of people like Joy Warren, who is here with us today. Joy is in her first year at Yale Law School, my alma mater. Unlike most of the other students there, she spent her childhood in foster care, and she has been entirely on her own since age 18. For seven years, she has lived without the support that permanent families provide...and all the while, she managed to receive a college degree, work as an advocate to improve foster care, and begin law school.

I met Joy in September at a conference called Destination Future, in which current and former foster children and homeless youth came together to talk about and learn about life skills and what they could do to help others overcome the obstacles they face every day. I've just received the report from the Conference, and it contains important messages for all of us. We need more awareness about this issue. Young people aging out of foster care need medical insurance. They need training and education. And that can only happen if we make greater investments in their lives.

Now, we know that there are countless people working in states, counties, and communities to meet those challenges -- many in this room are working to do just that.

There are programs in Texas and Florida, for example, that provide college tuition to state schools for young people in foster care who are accepted. In Los Angeles County, entry-level jobs are set aside for young people aging out of the foster care system. And like other Independent Living Programs, New York's is helping young people aging out of foster care with school, jobs, housing and the other tools that they need. One of those young people, Analeah Charles, is here with us today.

We should take these success stories and make sure they are replicated throughout our country. That's why I am so pleased to announce that the President's budget over the next five years will include \$280 million to help former foster children make the transition to independence -- and make the most of their lives.

We will be increasing funding for the Independent Living Program by 50 percent -- and giving foster children more help finishing high school, getting a job, and finding a place to live.

Now in many states and communities, the rule about aging out of foster care is whether you turn 18 or graduate from high school -- whichever happens first. So there are many children who are out of foster care even though they have not yet finished high school.

We will also be offering \$50 million in new competitive grants so that the states can continue to provide economic support to former foster children living through their transition.

We want to help more community-based programs that are giving homeless youth places to live and skills to build their futures. And I am pleased to announce that we are increasing funding for the Transitional Living Program by 33 percent.

And finally, the President's budget says that young people who age out of foster care should be eligible for Medicaid until they are 21. For too many young people, foster care means insurance -- and when they leave, they lose their Medicaid coverage.

In this country, I believe no person should be in the ranks of the uninsured -- but I certainly think no *young* person should be uninsured.

Now when we do all of this -- which I hope we certainly will in a bipartisan way, bringing new leaders of both political parties and our Congress together, and with the support of all of you throughout our nation who are advocates and workers in the field of foster care -- we will have a lot to celebrate. But the main reason I believe we will achieve what I hope we can with the President's leadership will be because of the courageous young people who are with us today who represent thousands and thousands of other young people across our country.

It will be because of young people such as Terry Harrak. When she turned 18, she was a senior in high school. But she soon found herself without foster care, without a job, without a place to call home. Night after night, she slept over at teachers' and friends' homes, she slept in metro terminals, she slept in hospital emergency rooms. Day after day, she would wake up and continue going to school. And she graduated.

Now I think that the story Terry has to tell us should be heard by everyone. She is now a participant in the Living Independently for Tomorrow Program in Alexandria, Virginia. She has a place to live, a job and community college to attend, and people to guide and support her. She is here with us today. It is my great honor to introduce Terry Harrak.