Let's spare a thought for youth in foster care who turn 18 this week. Traditionally viewed as a significant milestone to celebrate, an 18th birthday for these young people also signals their exit from the care system and no longer the responsibility of the state. It's a sad indictment that many of these vulnerable youth, often still suffering the trauma of childhood experiences that brought them into care in the first place, will leave the care system emotionally and financially ill-prepared for what lies ahead. At a time when young people are tending to leave their family homes later, often not until 25, why would we expect this fragile group, typically less ready than the average teenager, to be able to cope with independent adult life at just 18? Where are the opportunities for them that most young people in our community take for granted? What do they have cause to celebrate?

If a child protection system is going to be responsible for the safety and wellbeing of children, shouldn't it also assume responsibility for preparing them for adulthood and a positive and fulfilling life beyond care?

Unfortunately the gaps in current leaving care and after-care policy are deep and persistent. The long-term outcomes for many care leavers does not paint a pretty picture, as revealed in a CREATE Foundation Report Card tracking the progress of young people transitioning from care. Some spiral into homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, criminality, and are ultimately left chained to a lifetime of welfare dependency. The reverse is equally true when there is stability and a significant trusting adult relationship in the young person's life.
Young people may become concerned by minor affairs. If they have depression, the consequences could be serious.

Recent research continues to demonstrate the need for substantive change at a policy and systems level if we are to break the cruel cycle of poverty and disadvantage that attaches itself to this incredibly vulnerable population. In February, findings from the Swinburne University of Technology's study The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia revealed that almost two-thirds of homeless youth had come out of state care. Shortly afterwards, La Trobe University released its Out of Care Into University: Raising Higher Education Access and Achievement of Care Leaver report which highlighted the slim opportunities available for care leavers to go to university.

We could do so much more to better support these young care leavers, starting with systemic measures to improve leaving-care planning while youth are still in care. Once they have left care, better access to effective support services and programs in areas such as housing, health, training and ongoing counselling should be made available up to the age of 25 if required. If the state has deemed it necessary to assume guardianship of these young people, then they must reflect community norms in this regard.

Providing young people in care the opportunity to remain in care longer, potentially up until age 25 if need be, also holds promise as another part of the solution. As we all know, foster carers can have a critical influence in laying a firm foundation for older youth in care to successfully go out into the world, providing stability, mentoring, guidance and encouragement for them to pursue their goals and aspirations. Currently, there is no ongoing financial support provided to carers once their foster children turn 18, which can make it extremely difficult, in many cases impossible, for them to be able to commit to these young people during the post-18 years. This too must change. There must be financial incentives for foster carers to support and nurture vulnerable youth well beyond their 18th birthday.
I have worked in the welfare and community services sector for more than three decades. During this time I have witnessed first hand the transformative influence that a trusted and respected adult can have; values are learnt, education takes on new meaning and their affirmation critical in building self-worth. None of these things is exceptional for the majority of resilient young people in our community, but when absent can have life-long debilitating consequences.

We as a society are duty-bound to empowering youth in care with the same opportunities of all young people in our community, not only through a review of current leaving care policy but also through ensuring they receive the best care and support available in their formative years.

With this in mind, Fostering NSW, a partnership between the NSW Government and non-government foster care agencies and managed by the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA), is highlighting the need to recruit foster carers committed to making a lifelong difference for children and young people unable to live with their birth families. There is particular demand for those willing to foster adolescents. True, the challenges of fostering a teenager may be considered far greater compared to those of fostering a younger child. But, surely, so too would be the rewards that come with setting a young person who has had the most traumatic start in life on the road to a positive and meaningful future.

Now that would be something to celebrate.

To find out more about becoming a foster carer visit the Fostering NSW website: fosteringnsw.com.au or call 1800 2 FOSTER (1800 236 783).

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