NO PLACE LIKE

Each year, thousands of Washington kids hope for a permanent place to call home, but too often, our system fails them. As they get closer and closer to their 18th birthdays, their chances for finding a family diminish. Will changes to the foster care system help these kids?

BY CAROL TICE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN LAMONT

MALEKA TAYLOR vividly recalls the first night she was homeless. The petite 20-year-old, her black hair straightened and shot through with tiny blonde streaks, was sitting at a downtown Seattle bus stop in late winter 2005 when a bus pulled up. A former foster child, Taylor had been living in cheap local motels with her boyfriend after being kicked out of a YMCA transitional housing program. But now, there was no money left. She stood up as her bus creaked to a stop. Then she stood motionless as the bus doors closed and the bus rolled away. She slowly sank back down on the bench and started to cry. It was nearly midnight, bitter cold. "I realized I didn't have anywhere to go," she says. >>>>>>

WITHIN A COUPLE OF YEARS OF LEAVING FOSTER CARE, MALEKA TAYLOR FOUND HERSELF HOMELESS FOR ABOUT SIX MONTHS; TODAY, SHE IS EMPLOYED AND WORKING TO GET HER GED

LAST YEAR IN WASHINGTON STATE, time ran out for 445 young people like Taylor. Though most were in foster care for many years—some all their lives—they were never adopted. In foster care lingo, these kids age out of foster care. These are young people who literally cannot go home again.

Many turn 18 with few job prospects or life skills after a chaotic childhood. Forty percent of these children entered foster care when they were 6 or older, after years spent with their abusive or neglectful birth families.

Once children come into foster care, they face more disruption. One 2004 study of more than 600 Northwest foster care alumni cosponsored by Seattle foster care nonprofit Casey Family Programs showed 68 percent of aged-out foster kids had lived in four or more foster homes. And they may be in foster care for a long time—in the Casey study, aged-out foster kids had been in care an average of seven years. These long stays continue to be common, partly because many children are not legally available for adoption, despite a 1997 federal law that asks states to abandon efforts at birth-family reunification and move to terminate birth parents' rights after 22 months

Statistics for these aged-out young adults are grim. Unsurprisingly, considering their childhoods, they frequently become troubled adults. Another Casey study of Washington foster kids from 2004 found that only 30 percent of aged-out kids in this state had a high school diploma. Only a small fraction in our region—2.7 percent—go on to earn a bachelor's degree. About half have mental health problems and a third live in poverty. One study showed more than a third had been arrested within a year of leaving foster care. Seattle homeless advocates estimate close to half of local homeless kids have been in foster care.

Clearly, putting teens out on the street with a poor education and filling jails with fresh young offenders aren't desirable outcomes, either for former foster kids or for society. So why isn't more effort made to find adoptive homes for young people like Taylor before it's too late?

They can be found—even for older foster kids—but the search is a complicated puzzle that takes money, manpower and commitment. Right now, critics say, the state is lacking in all three of those needed elements. And a recent court order to implement sweeping changes to the foster care system (see sidebar on the Braam decision) will likely keep older-child adoption a low priority for the foreseeable future.

The system spends much of its $950 million bi-annual budget scooping up abused and neglected children and sheltering them from harm. Caseworkers are responsible for finding a safe place for every one of the children in foster care—around 9,300 of them as of early this year, up 16 percent from 2005. Compared with this daunting task, a 12-year-old girl who might wind up homeless and parentless when she turns 18 may be an undesirable outcome, but it simply isn't as urgent.

"It's not an emergency, but it should be," says Dee Wilson, a former longtime state foster care caseworker who is now executive director of the Northwest Institute for Children and Families at the University of Washington.

There's very little state money set aside to help older foster kids find homes. Last year, funding covered searches for a fraction—just 40—of the 275 kids legally free for adoption. And caseworkers, Wilson says, often don't search for adoptive families for older foster kids, especially those who have been in the system for a couple of years, because they don't believe they'll find any—a belief that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. They may not even ask current foster parents if they would be interested in adopting their charges. That was the experience of longtime Seattle foster parent Elaine Simons, who says she was never asked if she might adopt any of the 25 young people she cared for, five of whom were legally free for adoption.

The former longtime executive director of the Foster Parents Association of Washington State, Darlene Flowers, puts it simply. "There is an attitude in our state," she says, "that there's not much you can do for teenagers."

Annual cost of keeping one child in foster care:

=$9,000

Cost of doing child-specific recruitment to find one child an adoptive home:

=$5,000

Source: Children's Administration

THERE'S NO QUESTION that it's easier to find an adoptive home for cuddly toddlers who come with little baggage and few behavior problems than for older children who have strong memories of their birth parents and of trauma they've suffered, and siblings they want to visit. Given their life experiences, many older foster children feel hurt and angry—and many show it by lashing out.

A HAPPY OUTCOME: JOHN AND GLORIA WOODHOUSE ADOPTED SHELBY AND RILEY; THE SIBLINGS SPENT TWO YEARS IN FOSTER CARE

They may hit, curse, steal, lie, hoard food, harm themselves, break things or run away. Families willing to see beyond the bad behavior to the hurt, scared, lonely child within, who might thrive in their care, are hard to locate.

Adoptive mother Barbara Hankins of Chehalis, who has 12 adopted children, recalls one son she adopted at age 11. During a Christmas party, he peed on the family pool table and then jumped out a second-story window. One daughter, who joined the family at age 12, was kicked out of a prospective adoptive home for hoarding and eating a box of granola bars she found while cleaning the family car. "Even with all their behaviors, these are wonderful kids," she says. "They just want a Mom and Dad, someone there for them."

Barbara Sims, now 20, was one of those difficult children who never found a permanent home—and in fact, feared adoption. That fear is another barrier to finding homes for these kids.

Sims sums up her life in foster care simply. "I was a horrible kid," she says, smiling. "Not being with my mom made me crazy. One foster mom, when I was 13, she threw me down a flight of stairs, and I bit her on the ankle."

A heavyset African-American woman with a jeweled stud in her nose and a ring through the top of one ear, Sims was in foster care from the age of 3, after her diabetic mother became too ill to care for her. When she was 15, her mother died. She estimates she stayed in 40 foster homes.

After aging out at 18, she was lucky enough to land transitional housing and a life-skills training class at the YMCA. She works at Starbucks now and as a cook at Qwest field, while finishing up her GED. She dreams of being a pediatrician.

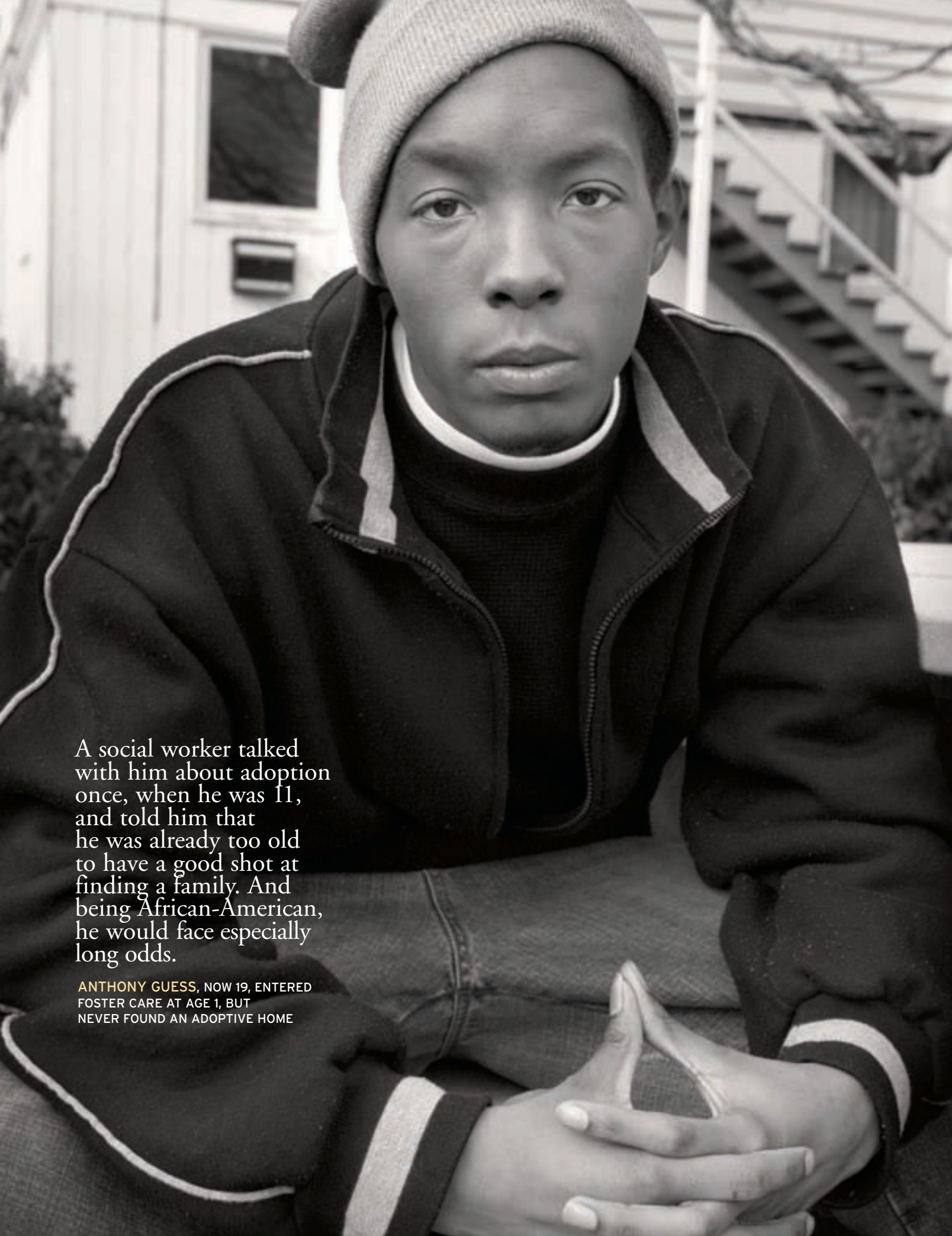
Though she knows it will be hard to make that happen without family support, she says adoption didn't look that attractive. What if she didn't like the family? She wouldn't be able to act up and get thrown out—the only control she'd had over her life since she was small.

Her fears aren't unusual. Social workers need better training in explaining the benefits of adoption to older foster kids, says Deborah Reed, supervisor of permanency and placement services for the state Children's Administration, a division of the Department of Social and Health Services. Kids don't always understand the value of having someone they can count on later in life. But with prompting, many can identify someone who could adopt them, such as a relative with whom they spend holidays or just an adult friend who has helped them out, Reed says.

Strong family ties can be another obstacle to convincing older foster kids that adoption is a good idea. If they have close ties to at least one birth parent or other relative, they may feel that adoption is disloyal. They also may fear permanency, as Sims did, since a transient lifestyle is what's familiar.

They may not even be interested in finding a guardian, a move often considered a good option for youth with close ties to birth parents. Some 3,000 former foster kids in the state live with adults who are able to make decisions on their behalf as their legal guardians, without formally adopting them.

Nineteen-year-old former foster child Anthony Guess, who grew up in the Central District, says a social worker talked with him



A social worker talked with him about adoption once, when he was 11, and told him that he was already too old to have a good shot at finding a family. And being African-American, he would face especially long odds.

ANTHONY GUESS, NOW 19, ENTERED FOSTER CARE AT AGE 1, BUT NEVER FOUND AN ADOPTIVE HOME

about adoption once, when he was 11, and told him that he was already too old to have a good shot at finding a family. And being African-American, he would face especially long odds.

Guess, a tall, slight young man with close-cropped hair, entered foster care at age 1, living with a family friend. At age 5, he was moved to his grandmother's house. The home was an abusive one. At 13, he fled to the streets and for three years stole and dealt drugs for money, cleverly avoiding arrest, sleeping and showering at friends' homes. Occasionally, he slept on benches in his old neighborhood.

At 16, ragged and hungry, he went to a Department of Social and Health Services office for help. He stayed in several group homes for older foster kids. "I'd never call it a home," he says. "I'd say, 'I'm visiting here. That's where I sleep.' "

Guess stayed in school at Cleveland High School, even winning a college scholarship from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Then, six months before graduation, with his age-out date fast approaching, he bolted. It was a bad move, he realizes now, but says he just couldn't take foster care anymore. After a year of struggle, he's working, getting his GED, looking to take care of his girlfriend and the couple's baby girl.

THE SADDEST PART OF STORIES like Guess' is that permanent homes can be found for older kids—if only somebody will look.

The state contracts with Seattle's Northwest Adoption Exchange to run a tiny, child-specific recruitment program that has had success finding families for older children. Caseworkers interview children about their interests, videotape them and identify relatives, friends, teachers and other adults in the children's lives who might adopt them. Adoption Exchange project manager Norma Nelson says the specialized recruitment program finds homes for about 70 percent of the children it works with, who have an average age of 9. Many are 13 or older.

Often there's an adult in the child's life who would take them in, says Billy Hancock, a recruiter who works with NWAE through Amara Parenting & Adoption Services, a private agency in Seattle.

He recalls his first case, involving a boy in fourth grade living in Mountlake Terrace. Hancock expected shoulder shrugs in response to his questions. Instead, the kid had a laundry list of requests, down to the type of pets and size house he had in mind. Finally, the boy handed him the phone number of a couple he'd struck up a friendship with during dinners at McDonald's with his foster family.

"I called them, and they said, 'We've been waiting,' " Hancock recalls. While many foster kids find homes with someone close to them, sometimes adoptive families come out of the blue. Some older adults are actively looking for older children. That was the case for former nurse Gloria Woodhouse and her husband, John, who works in the pharmaceutical industry. Last fall, the Issaquah couple, both in their 50s, adopted a sibling pair, Shelby, 9, an outgoing brunette, and bespectacled Riley, 7. The pair had been taken from a home where drug abuse caused them to be neglected and had been in care two years when Woodhouse first

ALL ABOUT BRAAM

A NEW PLAN AIMS TO FIX SOME OF THE BIG FLAWS IN FOSTER CARE

CURRENT DIRECTIVES for improvements and changes to the state's foster care system stem from a state supreme court case known as Braam v. State of Washington. First filed in 1998, Braam alleged that the constitutional rights of children who spend years in the state's foster care system and are moved dozens of times were being violated. In mid-2004, the state settled the case. This February, a specially appointed panel released a 14-point action plan for fixing foster care's flaws.

The plan's intent is to stop foster children from being bounced from home to home. For older teens, there are also mandates to provide more mental health services and independent-living training needed to prepare them for adult life—but that requirement doesn't phase in until next year. The timelines outlined by the Braam panel have to be met by the state or there will be additional legal action taken to compel compliance, Braam attorney Timothy Farris says.

If it's followed, the plan should help stabilize life for foster children. The system must dramatically increase the number of children kept in the same school when they enter foster care, for instance; it also must find more foster homes and do more specific matching of children to appropriate homes, rather than simply placing children wherever there is an empty bed.

Children's Administration manager Deborah Reed tactfully calls the Braam plan "aggressive" but says staff are dedicated to finding ways to meet the deadlines. C.T.

THE ACTION PLAN:

WHILE IT SLOWLY PHASES IN OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS, BY 2010 THESE ARE SOME OF THE BENCHMARKS THAT MUST BE REACHED:

-- **INCREASING** the total number of foster care beds by 50 percent
-- **INCREASING** the pool of caregivers who reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in care by 50 percent
-- **INCREASING** to 95 percent the number of foster children who receive monthly caseworker visits
-- **INCREASING** to 75 percent the number of children placed in a foster home that matches their needs
-- **INCREASING** to 50 percent the number of kids who remain in the same school when they enter foster care
-- **ELIMINATING** all placement of sexually or physically aggressive children without proper caregiver training or assessment for vulnerable children
-- **DECREASING** by 95 percent the number of children placed overnight in unlicensed settings (Department of Social and Health Services offices, apartments or hotels without a licensed foster family member or relative caregiver present)

PAUL VOSSELER, A BABY BOOMER, IS IN THE PROCESS OF ADOPTING AN 11-YEAR-OLD BOY

spotted them on the NWAE Web site.

The foursome hit it off pretty fast, Gloria Woodhouse recalls. Ten minutes into their first meeting, Shelby declared she wanted a tour of their house—specifically, of the inside of the refrigerator. After her chaotic former home life, she wanted to be sure there'd be something to eat.

The pair came with wounds. Riley had seen men abuse his mother and sister, and was an angry boy who'd lash out with his fists. "I could have seen him ending up in jail as a teenager," she says. "Now the little boy is back; he's learning to play with friends. He's just a different kid."

Silverdale retired naval officer Paul Vosseler believes aging baby boomers such as himself are a largely untapped, potential resource for foster teens who need homes. As boomers hit 60, many with more time on their hands, some may turn to volunteerism and in fact are being encouraged to do so by a couple of recently launched national campaigns. When he hit 59, Vosseler says he assessed his own life—financially fixed, own home, never married, probably 30 more years to live—and decided he could help a child.

In December, an 11-year-old foster son was placed in his home, with adoption pending this summer. He can hardly contain his joy when speaking of the boy he now believes he was meant to raise. The pair hit it off at their first McDonald's meeting, when Vosseler explained that he says grace before meals. His foster son's response? "Whew!" The pair enjoy going to church together and now say a grace for meals his son wrote, Vosseler reports.

"He told me he loves me just an electron of an atom less than he loves God," Vosseler says proudly.

FUNDING IN PERIL

FEDERAL BUDGET CUTS ARE CAUSING THE STATE'S FOSTER CARE SYSTEM TO LOSE MILLIONS

WHILE CHILDREN'S Administration managers are seeking additional state funding to comply with the mandates of the Braam settlement, another crucial source of funding for the foster care system is shrinking.

In February, President Bush signed the 2006 budget agreement, which includes cuts in the Title IV-E funding program. The program provides monthly support checks to many low-income relatives who care for children in foster care without obtaining a foster care license, making them ineligible for state foster family support payments. In the new budget, the requirements for receiving Title IV-E funding have been tightened, likely cutting off many state families.

The exact impact is still being calculated. A report from the Washington State Budget & Policy Center estimates the net loss to the state foster care system at between $11.5 million and $24.8 million this year. Over five years, the study estimates the reduction in funding will range from $56.2 million to $112.3 million.

The cuts worry child advocates, as they may discourage many kinship placements; studies show children placed in relative care fare better than those placed with nonrelative foster families. As of 2004, over one-third of our state's foster children are currently in the care of relatives, and increasing relative care is one of the state's major goals for improving foster care.

Children's Administration federal funding chief Jan Hoppler says the agency plans to obtain more state money to make up the shortfall from the federal IV-E cutbacks. Hoppler says the agency does not anticipate having to cut foster care payments to any families.

THE BRAAM DECISION may eventually help more foster kids be adopted. First filed in 1998, the Braam case alleged that the constitutional rights of children who spend years in the state's foster care system and are moved dozens of times were being violated. The state settled the case in 2004, and an action plan to fix foster care's flaws was released this February. The 14-point plan (see sidebar) is intended to help stabilize and improve foster children's lives.

When all points are implemented, kids will be moved fewer times and placed in homes more likely to suit them—and thus, they will be less likely to develop emotional problems. And children with fewer problems are more likely to be adopted.

Also, under Braam, if a child has been in care longer than two years, a special team must be convened to try to remove obstacles that may be keeping the child from finding a permanent home.

But in the short term, implementing Braam's court-mandated changes to foster care will cost upwards of $50 million by some estimates, and full state funding for those changes has yet to be found. Given the financial demands of compliance with the Braam settlement, Children's Administration officials are doubtful that much more money will be found in next year's budget for recruiting adoptive families.

One common roadblock is that older children often aren't legally free for adoption. Moving more aggressively to sever parental rights would also help many foster kids, some experts say. Currently, state caseworkers are hesitant to terminate parental rights if an adoptive home hasn't been found, essentially creating a legal orphan, says the UW's Wilson. On the other hand, families seeking to adopt a child often search only among legally free kids.

National youth adoption advocate Pat O'Brien, who heads the adoption agency You Gotta Believe in New York City, has spoken to local child welfare workers about the need to find adoptive families for foster teens. He decries what he describes as a widespread institutional attitude among social workers nationwide against moving aggressively to find adoptive homes for older foster kids. The hesitancy to sever parental rights is a big part of the problem, he says.

"Rather than create legal orphans, which they're worried about, they create de facto orphans nobody cares about," he says.

The key to making older-child adoptive placements successful, he says, is training adoptive families to make a CONTINUED ON PAGE 159

FOSTERING FACTS

A BY-THE-NUMBERS LOOK AT WASHINGTON'S FOSTER KIDS

KIDS IN FOSTER CARE

THE PERCENTAGE OF ALL WASHINGTON CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE, BY AGE GROUP:

0-1	1-3	4-7	8-11	12-14	15-17	18
6%	24%	21%	17%	14%	15%	3%

ETHNICITY OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE IN WASHINGTON STATE:

Native american	Asian / pacific islander	Black	Hispanic	White
7.7 %	1.4 %	11.5 %	13.2 %	65.5 %

A TICKING CLOCK

Older foster children stand a poor chance of getting adopted. In Washington state, the odds are even longer than they are for older foster youth in the nation in general. Some 155,000 children were adopted from foster care in the United States in 2003.

AGE ADOPTION WAS FINALIZED

Under 1	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-18
2%	60%	26%	10%	1%

ADOPTIONS

After the passage of the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997–which requires adoption plans be made for children who've been in foster care for 15 of the past 22 months–the number of Washington state adoptions increased dramatically. But the number of adoptions hasn't grown substantially since 2001.

YEAR AND NUMBER OF PLANNED ADOPTIONS

1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
631	838	1,020	1,022	1,183	1,053	1,204	1,110	1,239

ON THEIR OWN

What happens to foster youth who never get adopted and age out of the system at 18? The most recent statistics on their fate in the first few years after they leave the foster-care system don't paint a pretty picture.

ISSUE	FOSTER-CARE ALUMNI	GENERAL POPULATION
Mental health problems	54.4%	22.1%
Spent time homeless	22.2%	<1%
Earned a bachelor's degree	2.7%	24%
Got a GED instead of high-school diploma	28.5%	5%
Received public assistance	1.8%	3%
No health insurance	33%	18%
Employed	80.1%	95%
Living in poverty	33.2%	11%

Source: Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study of 659 former foster youth released in 2004. Participants in the study include Casey Family Programs, Washington State Office of Children's Administration and other agencies.

Fostercare

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 111

firm decision to take the child, rather than doing a tryout, as many adoptive families now do. Many foster kids come with bad habits that helped them survive in the past and may take time to unlearn, even in a loving adoptive family.

But once the kids see that you won't get rid of them no matter what, he says, they begin to flourish. And whatever progress a family can make with a child, that child's life will be better than if he or she had grown up without ever experiencing a stable home. "It's got to be about total commitment to these kids," he says. There is one new Washington law that, while it won't help foster kids get adopted, will at least improve their odds of avoiding homelessness. The bill, approved by the state Legislature in March, allocates $650,000 this year to allow 50 kids to remain in foster care through age 21 to finish high school or college. More children will benefit in coming years.

While launching children into adulthood without a permanent family still isn't an ideal outcome, extended support from foster parents could help kids who've had uncertain and chaotic childhoods grow into stable adulthood more easily.

Former foster kid Anthony Guess says if he'd known he could stay in foster care until age 21, his life now might be very different. He might not have bailed at 17. "Maybe I'd be going to Wazoo now and not having a baby," he muses.

Finding Home

These local nonprofit agencies focus on finding adoptive families for older foster children.

African American Resource Center, Tacoma; 253.572.3435
Amara Parenting & Adoption Services, Seattle; 206.260.1700; medinachild.org
Community Youth Services, Olympia; 360.943.0780
Lutheran Social Services/Families for Kids, Bremerton; 888.794.1794
Northwest Adoption Exchange, Seattle; 206.441.6822 or 800.927.9411; nwae.org
Rainbow Youth & Family Services, Seattle; 253.838.2809; ryfs1.com
World Association for Children & Parents, Seattle; 206.575.4550 or 800.732.1887
Youth for Christ, Tacoma; 253.572.7888 S