

Bill to help foster youth headed to Governor's desk

Change pushed by leaders of True Up movement provides more time, information to help young people succeed

Because lawmakers heard the urgent voices of True Up supporters, foster youth soon will have more time and information to make life-changing decisions about continuing their education and heading down a path to self-sufficiency.

Senate Bill 213, sponsored by Sen. Ken Winters, R-Murray, is on its way to the desk of Gov. Steve Beshear after winning unanimous approval of the Kentucky Senate and House of Representative. The bill's passage is a stunning achievement for a start-up group created to give voice to abused, neglected and abandoned youth across Kentucky.

Plans for a bill-signing ceremony are underway.

The legislation will extend the window for foster youth to petition the court to continue in state care from six months to one year following the youth's 18th birthday. It also better ensures that foster care youth understand their choices at age 18, have adequate opportunity to access the transitional living support services, and are able to initiate the process themselves.

The landmark change in foster care regulation will also officially eliminate the negative name for extending care, currently called "recommitting," and replace it with the more descriptive and accurate title, "Transitional Living Support."

"The futures of many of Kentucky's foster children will be brighter and more promising because lawmakers listened to some of Kentucky's most vulnerable people," said Dr. Eugene Foster, interim executive director of True Up.

The idea for the legislation came from meetings of former foster youth who are part of True Up's Youth Advocacy Council. In those meetings, many youth told similar stories of opting out of state care at age 18 and soon finding they were ill-equipped to make it on their own.

Many young people said they were discouraged from continuing in state-sponsored care or did not get the information they needed to make good decisions. Once they learned they needed continued support, the six-month limit on reentering state care had expired.

"Too many foster youth end up stuck in poverty because they did not make the right decision on their 18th birthday," said Frank Harshaw, True Up founder and chairman. "I'm thankful the leaders of our state realize that's not a compassionate or common-sense approach."

True Up youth and alumni voiced the need for SB 213 during the legislative session, and several testified about their experiences with “aging out” of state care.

Chelsea Hoover, a member of the True Up’s Youth Advisory Council and a 19-year-old student at Jefferson Community and Technical College, told lawmakers that she missed the deadline to continue with state supported-care and has struggled to make the transition on her own.

“I’m glad that our leaders in Frankfort listened to me,” Hoover said. “This change will make a big difference in the lives of foster kids and help them succeed.”

True Up is a collaborative movement spearheaded by eight non-profit agencies in Metro Louisville to enhance services for foster youth. Founding members include:

- Bellewood Home for Children
- Boys and Girls Haven
- Brooklawn Child & Family Services
- Home of the Innocents
- Maryhurst
- St. Joseph's Children's Home
- Sunrise Children’s Services
- Metro United Way (fiscal agent)