

Closing the state's multibillion-dollar budget gap could leave Yolo County's foster kids alone and without help as they step into adulthood.

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Closing the state's multibillion-dollar budget gap could leave Yolo County's foster kids alone and without help as they step into adulthood.

The Transitional Housing Plus Program helps former foster kids ages 18 to 24 pay rent, buy furniture, plan a budget, enroll in school and get a job instead of kicking them out the door.

In Yolo County, \$172,000 helps six young adults transition to adult life.

Without the housing program, the state shuts off the faucet on their 18th birthday, and "there's no one to turn to," said Amy Lemley, policy director for the John Burton Foundation, which focuses on foster care.

Lemley said she saw the days before the transitional housing program when foster kids "aged out" of the system and, on their 18th birthday, were forced to pack everything they owned into a garbage bag and leave.

"They are out the door that day," said Diana Williams, chief deputy director of county social services. "They have nothing.

"When I moved out from home, I had my parents. I could go over and ask them to get gas or go back home and do a load of laundry," Williams said. "I leaned on them still."

Foster kids don't have that support system. Some have bounced around to 10 or 12 households and never made a lifelong connection with an adult, Lemley said.

"We are their surrogate parents," said Nancy O'Hara, assistant director of social services. "They have no one — absolutely no one and nowhere to go."

The state program is on the chopping block as California faces a \$20 billion deficit next fiscal year. Even though it's not a state-mandated program, Williams said "it's an incredible resource for the kids, an incredible benefit."

The state Legislature created the housing program in 2001 while looking at "clear and compelling evidence" that the estimated 4,200 kids aging out of foster care each year were much more likely than their teenage peers to end up in jail or on the streets, Lemley said.

Still, one in five former foster kids is homeless within their first year of adulthood, according to a 2005 study by Casey Family Programs. And they're twice as likely

to end up in prison than their peers.

Foster care was "a one-way ticket to incarceration and homelessness," Lemley said.

Lemley described Yolo County's program as "small" but "a good example of working youth by youth to make sure the transition is successful."

A local service group is helping by playing poker. Soroptimist International of Davis will host its annual poker tournament at 6 p.m. Saturday at the Veterans' Memorial Center, 203 E. 14th St.

Soroptimist President Lea Rosenberg said she hopes to raise \$8,000. About 80 percent of the profits will go to the housing program, the organization's "signature project for the next couple years." The rest of the money will go to other Soroptimist service projects.

"Most folks don't realize when foster kids leave the system at 18 they are on their own," Rosenberg said. "Some of them are not ready for college; they have no job training. They're sort of floundering out there."

To get tickets, contact Rosenberg at (530) 756-0697 or learose@jps.net.

For a good cause

What: Texas Hold 'Em & More poker tournament, blackjack 22 and bingo, sponsored by Soroptimist International of Davis

When: 6 to 10 p.m. Saturday; poker players must be in their seats by 6:30 p.m., ready for the first hand

Where: Veterans' Memorial Center, 203 E. 14th St.

Tickets: \$60 for the poker tournament and \$40 for other games. Proceeds will benefit a newly established Soroptimist program that provides support to foster youths when they turn 18 and leave foster care

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