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**CHILDREN'S
LAW OFFICE**

CHILDREN'S LAW REPORT

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Independent Living Program Expands

In response to recent federal legislation, the Chafee Independence Program, the South Carolina Department of Social Services is implementing major changes in services which are provided to foster care youth to prepare them for living independently after leaving the foster care system. This legislation, which represents the first major expansion of the independent living program since its inception in 1987, doubles the level of federal funding available.

Geared toward strengthening and expanding independent living services for older foster care adolescents, the changes in South Carolina will be incorporated into DSS policies and procedures within the immediate future. Currently, there are 799 adolescents in South Carolina's foster care system, and 82% of this population is within the 16 to 18 year-old range. Often, when youth exit the foster care system, they are unable to live on their own and require extensive support services in their transition. SCDSS hopes to energize the independent living program by funding more expenditures for emancipation, education, employment, and skills development. The program emphasizes youth, staff, and community collaboration in forging a successful and critical transition to independent living.

SCDSS recognizes that the learning of independent living skills begins early in childhood and progresses with each developmental stage. Accordingly, they believe that these skills should be taught upon placement in foster care and integrated into the youth's case plan. Services will be individualized based on the specific needs of each youth with a central focus on developing a positive self concept and improving self esteem.

The new program lowers the age that self-sufficiency skills are taught from age 16 to age 13 and varies the services based on the developmental and chronological age of the youth. For adolescents between the ages of 13 and 15, the focus will be on education, self esteem enhancement, and basic daily living skills. Adolescents between the ages of 16 and 18 will receive more practical information on education, summer job opportunities, job skills preparation, and concrete skills for daily living such as apartment searching, home maintenance, banking, and cooking. Demographic data on youth aged 13 to 21 and youth who exited the foster care system at age 18 will be collected to assess the needed skills. Additionally, the youth will complete an assessment instrument at age 16 to address deficits, individual strengths, and long term plans. Six months prior to exiting foster care, the youth will complete another assessment instrument that outlines the agency's benefits and the agency's potential future role in their lives.

Youth will be encouraged to pursue their high school diploma/GED and will be offered educational support services including transportation, driver's education courses, and the provision

of senior graduation and SAT preparation expenses. The agency will work to develop individualized employment self-sufficiency plans, including paying for certification courses and providing child care, interview clothing, and job skills training classes.

The keystone of the program will be incorporating youth involvement and participation into every facet of the program. Foster children over the age of 13 will help formulate and implement their independent living case plan. They will be encouraged to develop leadership skills through attendance at various local youth training programs and conferences. The agency also hopes to form a foster children's association to serve as a forum for support and communication for these adolescents. Publication of a youth newsletter will continue with part of each issue devoted to issues related to independent living.

Once youth leave the foster care system after reaching age 18, the agency will assist the youths with initial start-up expenses such as phone/electric/gas/water deposits, furniture, basic household goods, and limited monthly apartment or rental payments. They will also receive information regarding Medicaid coverage and possible eligibility. The independent living program will also include after-care services for youth who leave the system at age 18 but later return in need of further services. The agency will maintain an open door policy for the possible return of foster care children until they turn 21 years old by continuing to provide services such as financial assistance, housing information, counseling, and employment opportunities, as needed.

This ambitious plan to provide adolescents with the skills necessary for attaining self-sufficiency requires the cooperation of the community as well. Group care programs and county offices will be evaluated annually to determine the responsiveness of services to youth needs, and these providers will meet quarterly to assess weaknesses. Additionally, the agency hopes to collaborate with the public and private sector to meet the needs of foster care children. For example, Florence Crittenton is a private community provider that sponsors an independent living program for older adolescents in Charleston County. The Foster Parent Association, the Center for Children and Family Studies, and United Way of South Carolina can all work together with SCDSS to offer perspectives on needed transitional skills, mentoring, tutoring, and employment/educational support services.

SCDSS will supervise and oversee the independent living program in conjunction with an advisory committee composed of agency staff, youth, university staff, foster parents, and group care providers. They perceive a need to hire additional staff to implement and monitor the program on a statewide basis. Foster parents, adoptive parents, staff, and group care providers will all need to be trained on these emancipation issues. The independent living training will likely be integrated into the initial pre-licensing training for foster and adoptive parents and the re-licensing training for foster parents.

A successful transition into adult living is a powerful and essential gift that the community can give to foster children. This new legislation and the proposed initiatives will enable our state to support older adolescents and allow them to take an active role in mapping out their goals and creating brighter futures.

For more information, contact Petri Carrington-Jones at (803) 898-7159 or Don Adams at (803) 898-7567.

South Carolina Foster Child's Bill of Rights

I have the right to:

1. Be treated as a normal and important human being.
2. Be cared for with love and affection.
3. Be provided adequate food, shelter and clothing.
4. Be heard and involved with the decisions of my life.
5. Be informed about and have involvement with my birth family and siblings, including the right to reject visits or contacts.
6. Complete information and direct answers to my questions about choices, services and decisions.
7. Reasonable access to my caseworker or a person in the agency who can make decisions on my behalf.
8. Express my opinion and have it treated respectfully.
9. Request the support and services that I need.
10. Individualized care and attention based on my unique skills and goals.
11. Ongoing contact with significant people in my life such as teachers, friends, my personal supports and relatives.
12. Access to my case record to help me meet my goals.
13. Personal property, personal space and my privacy.
14. Be notified of changes that affect my permanence, safety, stability or well-being.
15. Practice my own religion.
16. Know what is expected of me in my foster placement.
17. Be cared for without regard to race, sex, religion and disability.
18. Caretakers who are interested in me and will support my involvement in social and school activities.
19. Have goals.
20. A plan for my future and the support I need to accomplish it.

Youth Advisory Committee

Since January 2000, an advisory committee of youth in foster care has met to provide input to the South Carolina Department of Social Services. The eight youth who comprise the committee are representative of the foster care population demographically, geographically, and by type of placement. The overall purpose of the group is to make recommendations to DSS for improvements in the foster care system. The first priority of this special committee was to develop a *Foster Child's Bill of Rights*, which has been reprinted on the previous page. This document has been endorsed by DSS. The group is now turning its attention to development of a brochure for children entering foster care. The brochure will address questions children frequently have upon initial arrival in a foster care placement.

Screening Volunteers and Employees

In keeping with its mission to fight child abuse at all levels, Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina has prepared useful guidelines on screening volunteers and employees who work directly with children and families. The booklet is entitled *A Guide for Making Decisions about Whom and How to Screen*.

This guide encourages private and public organizations to take preventive steps to minimize the risk of children being abused by staff or volunteers. While most volunteers and employees who work with children are safe and caring, unfortunately some pedophiles and other abusers seek positions of trust to gain access to children. Accordingly, all prospective paid and unpaid staff should undergo a thorough screening and training process before initial contact with children. Recognizing that no screening procedure can be 100 percent effective, policies are also recommended that support an immediate and appropriate response to disclosures of abuse including investigation by an outside organization.

The booklet sets out factors to consider in tailoring an effective screening practice for an organization or agency, including the nature of the worker's contact with children and a cost/benefit analysis of the available funds and probable utility of the practice. It also presents minimum screening recommendations which include the following: written applications, signed releases authorizing access to SLED and other records, employment checks, personal reference checks, and personal interviews. Additional screening methods such as motor vehicle record checks, criminal background checks, and sex offender registry checks are also detailed.

For more information or to get a copy of this booklet, please contact Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina at (803) 733-5430 or 1-800-CHILDREN. Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina is a nonprofit organization which promotes, through public awareness, education, and direct services, the creation of a state where all children have a safe environment in which to grow and learn.

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