

NEW HAMPSHIRE UNION LEADER

Foster care advice for success: ‘Treat each child like your own’

By PAUL FEELY
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BEDFORD — Experts, administrators and executives from the world of New Hampshire child services gathered Thursday morning, offering their opinions on the best way to help young people successfully transition from foster care to college campuses. But the best solution offered all morning may have come from a woman who navigated that journey herself.

“Everyone thinks it’s so complicated,” said Fatima Plummer, an advocate for youth in foster care since leaving the system at age 16. “The best thing you can do, as a social worker, caregiver, foster parent — is treat each child like they are your own. It’s that simple.”

Plummer was part of a panel of former foster care children, who have all successfully gone on to college, who spoke at a Fedcap Solution Series forum held at the SERESC Conference Center in Bedford. Representatives from Families in Transition, the New Hampshire Division for Children, Youth and Families, as well as the state’s Office of Minority Health and Refugee Affairs also took part in the discussion, sponsored in part by the state’s Health Profession Opportunity Project.

Christine McMahan, president and CEO of Fedcap (a New York-based nonprofit workforce development agency), said Thursday that among young people who have spent time in foster care, half are unemployed and fewer than half have a high school diploma. She cited studies that show within two years of leaving the child-welfare system, half will be homeless and one in four will be incarcerated.

“We know the reality of these numbers,” said McMahan. “Far too many of our kids are failing. If we look at the data that says that of the children in our system, only 70 percent think about going to college. Of those, only 10 percent make it into college, and of those only two or three percent finish college. These outcomes are tragic in terms of lost human potential, and the consequent social problems cost American taxpayers billions of dollars in long-term support, entitlement programs and incarceration. We must all hear that as a call to action.”

“If we lose one youth, because they have not been able to obtain success and meet the opportunities of their potential, as an entire community and an entire nation — we all lose,” said Sen. Molly Kelly, D-Keene. “It’s imperative to the long-term success of our youth in New Hampshire. It would further impair our population growth, and our economic growth.”

The forum discussed the state’s Health Profession Opportunity Project. HPOP offers an opportunity for motivated, eligible, low-income adults to train for and find jobs in health care occupations in New Hampshire — specifically jobs in the health care field.

Dr. Trinidad Tellez, director of the state's Office of Minority Health and Refugee Affairs, said health care is one of the state's most stable employment sectors. Labor market statistics show there were 2,900 education and health care jobs added statewide between 2008 and 2009, and suggest growth in several health care occupations over the next 10 years.

The forum's keynote speaker was Maureen Beauregard, president and CEO of Families in Transition, serving more than 170 homeless families and 180 children each night. She revealed to those in attendance that she herself entered the foster care system in Massachusetts at age 4.

"Every foster child can grow up to be happy, healthy adults, if they receive the support and services they need," said Beauregard. "I often wonder how it is that I made it here, when so many others didn't. And it's because I received that support."

Lisa Temple, a University of New Hampshire graduate who was removed from her birth parents at age 4 and lived in foster care until age 18, addressed the group as part of a small panel of speakers. She is currently close to obtaining a master's degree in early childhood education at Southern New Hampshire University.

"There are a lot of things in my life that I couldn't control, but one thing I knew I could control was my grades." Temple said she was the first person in her family to graduate from high school, as well as college. "I was very focused on school. I did really well in school, because that's something I wanted for myself. I wanted to get to college."

"I think it was a nudging in that direction, toward college, that I received in high school that helped me decide," said Mark Wheeler, who spent the last three years in college after spending the previous five in the New Hampshire foster care system. "I realized that it was an option, and that there was money there for someone like me. Once I realized it was a possibility, I really started thinking about it. Having someone to talk to about the options is invaluable."

"Don't just launch me into college and leave me," said Plummer, a graduate of Monroe College who is now a licensed nursing assistant. "It would be nice to have someone there to check in with, to talk to while you are in college."

For more information on the HPOP program, call 410-3347.

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