

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT: *Defying the Odds: Aging out of foster care in Placer County*

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ELAINE KOUVDOS: Foster youth predominantly have a higher rate of homelessness than youth that have not necessarily been touched by the child welfare system. There's not one reason for that. That could be due to removal from, you know, parent or guardian home, placement history, child behavioral or emotional problems [...] substance use, alcohol use, and just a lot of the challenges that come from living with trauma. [...] foster youth are less likely to graduate from high school. And they have more of a struggle in terms of obtaining higher education and a lower graduation rate.

CHRISTINA NICHOLSON: There was one study that said that one in four foster youth were still coping with the symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder, after leaving foster care, and that's double the PTSD rates of veterans returning from recent wars. It's been overlooked in the past.

CHRIS GRAY: I'm Chris Gray and today on The Placer Life, we're taking a look at one program helping young people in Placer County defy the odds as they age out of foster care. Katie Combs Prichard with our Health and Human Services department is our guest host.

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: Hello. So, there are now Transitional Housing Programs, sometimes shortened to THP, in every county in California, along with a number of other services and supports for young people who are aging out of the system. But years ago, when a foster child turned 18 that was it: they were on their own.

ARIEL: If I did not have THP Plus, I, I don't know what would have happened. You know, like, the discouragement from everywhere that I went and how I felt, and how I couldn't get my own place. I don't know where my life would be. When you get turned down so many times and you're so vulnerable... I've had so many friends choose different routes, you know, they're all, you know, I have a lot of friends from my childhood that are all drug addicts that I can't even associate with. Not to say that I would go be a drug addict. But you know, you don't know when you're, you're shut down for so long. And you get into this small little box and you're like, I don't know what to do, and you

give up. At least that's how I feel. When I look at some of my friends that are drug addicts, like, you just got shut down, and had no nothing to live for. So now you're just getting high all the time, you know. So that very much could have been me. But it wasn't because I had, I had the program.

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: This is Ariel - well, it's not her real name, but a pseudonym we chose to protect her privacy. Now in her 30s, Ariel was placed in foster care as a young teenager.

ARIEL: Coming from a home where, my mom had me really young, she was 15 when she had me, my dad was 16. I didn't see him for a long time afterwards. But it was very much like, me and my mom grew up together. So a lot of choices that were made were, I don't know, almost together sometimes. Or, and especially when I started getting older, like, you know, the responsibility was a lot on me. So I think I just started thinking like, I was ready to be an adult, even though I wasn't an adult. And then seeing that my environment wasn't healthy and like other people seeing my environment wasn't healthy. And then yeah, eventually getting placed into foster care.

[...]I entered foster care in like, I think I was 13, placed with one family, they had just me in there at first, and then like, almost immediately after they had like four other kids come in, and a daycare, very busy. So I was very determined to, you know, go to school, do as much as I could to get out, like, be on my own, did a lot of like extracurricular activities, got a job, got my own car, like, did a lot of things to not be there. So I was very much determined to have my own place as soon as I was 18.

[...]when I was 18, I was just like, I can leave here officially, and try to get my own place. That was always the thing, get my own place, create my own space, like, my own space, that no one can just open the door. Or my own space where I'm not sleeping on someone's couch. You know, it's just like, my apartment, my things decorated how I wanted them to be.

[...]I could not get an apartment. Even though I had a full time job. I did not make three times rent, I didn't have credit score, I didn't have any of those things to get me an apartment. And then rooms for rent, were just a little sketchy for an 18 year old. Like, I didn't want to go live with strangers.

[...] So being told as an 18 year old, like, okay, you know, you're on your own, like, go ahead and do it. Like if I didn't have a car, I didn't have somewhere to stay. There's plenty of people out there who are just like, *Okay, I have nowhere to go*, you know, and then you look at the homeless people, and a lot of them were young, back then anyway. Because there was no resources at all. There was nothing to do. It was literally like, *Okay, well now you're 18, so you're an adult, so go live your life, you know.*

ELAINE KOUVDOS: TAY stands for transition age youth and transition age youth is used interchangeably with non minor dependents. And that really defines our 18 to 21 year old population. So these are youth who have been or are in the process of exiting foster care have been in foster care in the process of exiting foster care, and will automatically transition into a non minor dependency status as transition age youth unless they opt out.

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: Elaine Kouvdos is with the county's Children's System of Care, a division that spans everything from child abuse investigations to substance use and mental health supports to Elaine's team -- which is specifically focused on Transition Aged Youth. Twenty years ago, her team didn't exist.

[...] I think prior to the establishment of extended foster care, we were seeing exactly that which was youth transitioning out of care and not having anywhere to go. [...] Prior to Assembly Bill 12, being passed in 2010, and implemented in 2012, respectively, by counties, foster youth were exited from the dependency care system at age 18. And so what we were finding is that those youth would end up experiencing homelessness, they didn't have the life skills, the support, they needed the experience they needed, in order to live a life successfully as young adults.

[...] With the passage of Assembly Bill 12, this extended foster youth foster dependency care status from ages 18 to 21. To really allow them to participate in extended care, it's voluntary, to give them the support they need to establish the life skills to help them be successful as young adults.

There's close to 400,000 foster youth in the United States and 60,000 of those foster youth being in the state of California. When our TAY program was established, we had about

38 transition age youth at implementation, and then it just kind of steadily increased and was as high as 82 in a year, I'm speaking on a yearly basis. At present, we have 49 youth being served.

[...] We have a committed group of transition age youth social workers that work with them, and help them really establish you know, their own kind of, help them identify and establish their own path in life, so you know what direction they want to go in.

[...] Prior to a youth turning the age of 21, we will hold a meeting a collaborative meeting, it's called a 90 day transition meeting. And at that meeting, they might have their current THP, non minor dependent housing provider, social worker there. And then we also will invite Christina Nicholson from Whole Person Learning there to talk about her THP Plus Program, which is a program which they then can transition to, should they meet the eligibility requirements for Whole Person Learning.

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: The Transitional Housing Program Plus -- which participants now simply call the HOPE program -- supports young adults exiting foster care -- either if they opt out of extended foster care at age 18, or when they age out of extended care at 21. Back when Ariel entered the program, she was just 19.

ARIEL: [...] I was like, Look, what are the guidelines of this program? Like, I can't get my own place? I don't know what to do. I'm staying on someone's couch. Like, I want to be independent, but I can't...t like there's no...Yeah, there's just nothing, right? I can't be on my own. And she's like, the requirements were that you had to sign up for school, which actually I already was in school. And then, you know, just, I think a couple of other things were like, you know, you had to participate in some of their programs. You had to have like, visits with them. And I was like, *Okay, I'm ready. Let's do it.*

CHRISTINA NICHOLSON: Before there was THP-Plus, there really was just the Independent Living Programs that had maybe what they called stipends, like a little bit of funding that could maybe go towards housing, but then they started looking at those statistics. And then it was like, *Okay, we need we need a transitional housing program that actually has much more teeth in it and funding -- and it's, it's coupled, it's the intensive financial support, but that's completely coupled with intensive Life Skills Training Support.*

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: This is Christina Nicholson, the director of Whole Person Learning which is the group that runs the HOPE program.

[...] We bring together teams and what, the supports of the young person, and then we go through those domains: employment, education, transportation, and whatever it is specifically. So if somebody wants to gain training and employment, we can connect them with Golden Sierra Job Training Agency. In fact, Golden Sierra Job Training Agency was an initial partner almost 40 years ago, like a lot of people have gotten certificates in like HVAC, heating, ventilation and air conditioning or cosmetology, or esthetician or medical assisting and it's like, it's really great to use this program while you're doing like a short term training and that you can you can get employed. So that might be somebody's goal. And we have all these connections based on what they explained to us what their goals are. Education, Sierra College, we've been a part of them from the beginning when they wanted to get a guardian scholar program going at a community college. Not just a state college or a university. Guardian scholar programs are specifically for former foster youth. And so, additional support available, financial support -- and not like sitting down and filling out a financial aid application for someone but sitting down next to them while they fill it out. So that when it comes around again, they have to apply every year. When it comes around again, they know how to do that -- they you know, like okay, where did you put your password. Let's, you know, we might have, you know, a staff person write that down somewhere. But, you know, those are organizational skills tied in with it's like life skills, it's living skills.

ARIEL: [...] they helped me with the deposit, then they went through how the percentages were going to work. And then they also had a requirement where you had to save a certain amount, which I know is changed now too. But like you had to save, I would say like 50% of your income into a savings account. And they were paying, like, I want to say like a big chunk in the beginning. Like I think they may have even just paid the first month. And then after that it like went down by like 10%.

[...] Lincoln was like, my comfort zone. It was like, where I had all my friends and stuff. So I really wanted to be there if I could. And then like, comfortable driving to the ... you know, Sierra College and stuff, like just knowing the route. So it's like every apartment complex in Lincoln I tried to get into; applied, talked to the managers like, *Hey, I promise like, I'm not like every other 18 year old, I won't be partying, I just want an*

apartment, please let me in. And it was always Yeah, like the three times rent or not making enough back then. I think I got paid like 7.25 an hour. You know, so it was ... yeah, it just wasn't enough money. But um, so yeah, the one place that the apartment I really wanted to get, basically the nicest one in Lincoln. That's the one they got me into. And I was like, Yes. Like finally. And the manager was like, hesitant. She's like, what, I've never heard of this program, like, kind of give us a little pushback. And Ruth was my worker, and she was in there with me. And I was really uncomfortable. Because I'd already been like, shut down and kind of made to feel like, like, I wasn't good enough to have the apartment. It was nice having, like an adult in the room, you know. Like, now that I'm a mom, I'm like, oh, yeah, that's something your mom or your dad does, right? Like go in there like, oh, no, you're not going to treat my daughter like this, I'm going to, you know, she's moving in. There's my deposit. There's all that stuff. Like, you can't say no, because we've checked all these boxes. So you're getting an apartment. So yeah, that was just like, it was like a relief having someone there to advocate for me. And also like feeling, so, you know, that I didn't have a voice for so long. And I was 18 and I was working and I was going to school, so I was like I felt like I was doing everything right. But I still wasn't able to live on my own.

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: That's where Christina's team and the HOPE program come into play.

CHRISTINA NICHOLSON: it's interesting, because there, I mean, there's a level of perspective from landlords that young people aren't going to be reliable tenants, you know, and, and especially if you're 18-19, even 21 to 25 years, you're not pulling in two and a half, three times \$1,800. You know, I mean, that's, that's a, that's a big ask. And so yeah, that's why and we kind of do it that way, we'll, you know, we'll write the letter behind the scenes, and then they can they can put that down. [...] When you have a master lease, or you have a lease that's under say, Whole Person Learning, that that helps Whole Person Learning build credit, we're going to pay the rent every time, but it doesn't help the person. So there'll be a percentage that they'll pay and a percentage that will pay. But essentially, they they get their name on the lease their name on the utilities, their name on those pieces. And when we're talking to them, and explaining what our program does, that's one of the selling points for them. And they're like, *Oh, you don't give me money? And then have me go figure it out?* No, well, we'll pay to the landlord, we'll do you know, Walmart cars, or grocery cards, or, you know, we might

pay for an automotive repair gas cards is a big, you know, continual support; quarters for laundry coins. So it's that ... those types of, you know, essentials, really to be able to have housing stability, and then again, it's, it's coupled with that, that life skill support, so you're slowly paying more and more on their own. They might start out paying \$40 for the second month's rent, then \$80, then \$100. You know, so so it goes up that same increment, based on what the amount of that apartment is. And they get to choose a place that's near their supports their employment, their education.

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: Ariel found just that.

ARIEL: It was a one bedroom apartment, walk in closet. It had an open kitchen. Pretty small living room, and it was like upstairs with like a big tree outside the window. And Ruth and THP Plus they took you to IKEA to get furniture. So like -- and I never been to IKEA before. I go there all the time now, but I had never been, so when I went to IKEA it was just like an amusement park. Like, I get to pick out my dishes and a dining room set and like they just, they hooked me up with everything I needed. So yeah, furniture was from IKEA. And then we went to Walmart and we got like paper towels and you know, all the extra stuff and loaded my apartment up and I got to put you know, everything that I owned in there. And then I think I ended up getting like a couch like off Craigslist back in the day or something like that. But yeah, it was ... I had my posters on the wall.

CHRISTINA NICHOLSON: We've had people not unpack for maybe like three months, because they're just not sure they're going to, they're going to be able to stay there. Even though they might have signed a one year lease, there's just that patterning of it hasn't worked out that way for them in their life. So after three months, they like, okay, they might like unpack, and they kind of then then they said, Well, I do want to go get some counseling, but they don't want to do it right away. And when you kind of mandate or force somebody to do something, you know, that's that, again, that's like you can, you can be involved, so you can be engaged or you can be *empowered*.

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: Empowerment is the key idea behind the HOPE program. Even the HOPE name comes from the first group of youth who participated. As much as the program is about finding stable footing, it's also about finding your voice. And that was true for Ariel.

ARIEL: We were part of like, I don't know, like feedback groups, like they'd bring us in and be like, how's the program working for you? And like, one of the things I was saying is that it's like, unfair to continue to save 50% of my income if I'm paying more in rent. So they actually adjusted that, like, while I was in the program, which I thought was really cool. And I think that that, like, adult listening to what I had to say, and like actually implementing it, did crazy things for me. Like, I've never stopped. Like if something's seems a little off, like I'm totally okay with being like, *Oh, do you think maybe we could do it this way? Or, like, would this be better?* Or like just being open to the conversation and not feeling super reserved. Which was nice, because my voice was taken from me, like I couldn't, you know, achieve these things as an adult even though I was deemed an adult but wasn't, you know, so? Yeah, that was huge. I think in the end, they do a lot of that with like, talking to the people in their program, and like, just checking in making sure they're okay. And like *hearing* them.

CHRISTINA NICHOLSON: Like from the get go, it's like, yeah, let's this is your program, it's not my program. I don't have a cookie cutter, you know, I don't have a set, every single participant that comes in will do this specific resume. You already have a resume when you come in, and I'm probably going to have you go work with Golden Sierra Job Training Agency or the Career Center at the, at the community college or wherever, because that place is probably going to tailor it to you know, what career fields you want to go into. But if you need help with that, we can help you with that, too. But we don't want to be duplicating services. That's a huge piece of that collaborative portion.

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: Tell me about your job situation.

ARIEL: The first job I got was at Quiznos my work there for quite a while. I never really, I'd like to say, saved up money and got all the stuff but I didn't really ever save a lot, you know, because just being young, spending money, trying to participate in activities and all of that. And then I actually switched jobs from Quiznos to Jamba Juice, and I got like a pay raise. I think, like \$6.50 at Quiznos to like \$7.25, at Jamba Juice, right. But ya know, I worked there, and then I saved up and I was trying to get a car. In foster care, you can't get your driver's license unless your foster parents sign off on your driver's license, and they have to assume liability for you. And a lot of foster parents will not do that for their foster kids. So I found a loophole at DMV, because they didn't know I was a foster kid. And I called my mom. And I was like, Look, I've never asked you for anything. I need

you to show up at DMV and sign a paper. And she did. And I got my driver's license. And then I got a car. And then I was free. Like, I was like, I can, I can drive, I can leave, I can escape.

[...]So I think I worked there for like a year. And then I was like, Okay, I need to make more money, because I'm getting closer to the end of the program. And I know I'm gonna have to pay more rent, and my lease is coming up. And you know, just trying to prepare for that and actively talking to Ruth about it. Like, what do you think I should do? And she's like, Yeah, you know, you you should find a different job that pays more. I'm like, okay, yes, that's what I need to do. So then she set me up with Sarah at EDD; we did the resume, we did the interview. We did all that stuff and I started putting my resume out there. And I got, I actually ended up getting a job at Allstate Insurance. And it was like a very professional job. I didn't think I was gonna get that job --so it was like a desk job; you had to dress nice. And Sarah at the EDD gave me money for clothes. Once I got the job, she... I guess they have like a grant that pays for clothes for if you do get a job and for interview clothes, so I got to go shopping and get like business attire, which I didn't want to dip into my savings for that. And I didn't have to. So yeah, I think I went to Target and I got a bunch of stuff that I could wear at work. I worked for Allstate for 11 years.

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: Ariel's career isn't the only long lasting impact that the HOPE program has had on her life.

ARIEL: The thing was is that once they taught me how to save money -- like once I actually put 50% in the beginning and like started growing that account, and like not spending it on, like, you know, spending it right away. It really taught me the value of that. And I continued to do that after the program too. And I didn't say in the program, like, *I want to buy my own house*, like that wasn't like in my thought process. But then when rent spiked up on my second apartment, I was like, This is crazy. And then I looked at my savings account, and I was like, Can I do this? Like, can I buy my own house right now? Like, I was 20. And I was like, I don't want to sign another lease. Like you're telling me to pay \$200 more a month for this apartment that isn't that great. Like, now? It could use some new carpets, like, I'm tired of my neighbor. You know, like I'm ready. Yeah, so I applied for a home loan. And I had enough savings. And I had a credit by then because I had a credit card that I was, I would just use it and then pay it because Ruth

told me to do that. So I had a credit score and I ended up buying a house at 20. So I mean, that was ... it was kind of like a quick choice. It was just like the savings was there and I didn't want to pay more rent, and I just made the choice. I swear I bought a house and like thought about it in like two months.

[...] I got approved for like, 135,000. And back then all the houses just like crashed. It was like, what, like 2010? Yeah, 2010, something like that. But I got to my house, my three bedroom house in Roseville for 114,000. My mortgage payment was 750. At that time, I was, I was gonna be paying \$1026 for rent.

I wanted a house with red, red trim and a white house. This is again, my 20 year old brain, right. Like, I was just like looking around for a white house with red trim. I kept looking at ones that were white with red trim, fully knowing that I could paint a house. But I had it in my head that that's what I wanted.

I get my keys, I was really excited. And then the first night alone was a little weird. Like if you know, like, lock all the doors or windows and like feeling a little scared because you're alone. But then also just being super grateful and happy. You know, started teaching myself how to cook.

NATURAL SOUND: Cooking in present day.

ARIEL: [...] when we got the place I was, I think I was like three months pregnant, or two, two and a half, three months pregnant. It's like barely showing, you know, and I'm just like, Okay, time to paint. Like, I've never painted a wall, right? Like in an apartment, like, you can't paint a wall. So I'm like, I'm painting everything. Definitely got on a few ladders too. Yeah. Didn't fall. But, ya know, we moved in, and I painted before we moved our stuff in. So I literally painted like all day, and then let it dry, and then moved all our stuff.

NATURAL SOUND: (House tour)

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: Ariel, her husband and son still live in the same house she bought a decade ago shortly after she graduated from the HOPE program. Her son is now 11.

NATURAL SOUND: (House tour)

ARIEL: Just watching my son grow up in a house... My son's never lived in an apartment, which is kind of crazy. Because I lived in so many apartments growing up. Like just, every six months we would move. So it is weird to think that he's had that stability this whole time. And both of his parents. It's, it is nice thinking about that.

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: That you kind of changed the story...

ARIEL: It's not repeated. Yeah, the story's not repeated. Yeah, it's nice to do that, for sure.

ELAINE KOUVDOS: I think it's been amazing just to watch our youth transition successfully into adulthood and really, helping kind of break the that cycle, you know, of homelessness, and having the opportunity to be employed to have an education to be successful as young adults, building up their self confidence. You know, growing up, having our youth growing up in the system, and maybe not having permanent connections and that uncertainty as to what their future will look like, what will happen, where will I live, who will I be with . and to be able to be independent and having that sense of security has been very fulfilling. I think there's peace of mind for the social workers knowing that, you know, our transition age youth are prepared for adulthood and are able to thrive and be independent without their oversight and departmental oversight and court oversight.

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: Now that's Elaine with the County's children's system. Christina and the HOPE program share her sentiment.

CHRISTINA NICHOLSON: I'm very fortunate I've been able to see all these changes happen during the time that I've been working with this population, and also just see young people defy those statistics. That isn't them; it isn't what's happening for them. Even 2021-2022 HOPE graduates, 89% were employed versus 35% of former foster youth. [...] 56% attending college, while they say that only 10% go to college; 100% living in safe and stable housing, and all of them maintaining their apartment rentals

independently. And that's contrasting with the nearly 40% of transitioning youth who are homeless within 18 months of discharge.

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD: Those statistics from Christina are from recent graduations, but Whole Person Learning follows up with young adults five years later, as well -- and at their most recent 5-year followups, 100% of former HOPE participants were living independently with two owning their own house. And 93% were employed.

Between extended foster care now open through age 21, and HOPE program eligibility expanding even just last year, more young adults have these opportunities at their fingertips.

CHRISTINA NICHOLSON: Now it actually goes up to age 25, just passed effective July 1, 2022. Young people can stay for 36 months instead of 24. And up until they turned 25 - till the 25th birthday instead of their 24th birthday.

ARIEL: You use it how you want to use it, right. So like, even when I'd go back, and I talk to people who are graduating out or just getting in or close, I'm like, you can just be in this program and get free groceries and get discounted rent and get an apartment, and not utilize it to the to the maximum, right, like you can do make poor choices you cannot achieve or save as much or, you know, you can do whatever you want to but if you actually use the program, and that time to build yourself up to be you know, a successful adult, do it, you know, and then using your resources, because it's like, you know, you may not always ask for help, because you feel like you don't want to, but they're like, Here, here's all these people, we're going to do all these things for you, you know, in different areas, it and it's very much like, you know, like your parents shed, you know, like you practice doing your interview skills with your mom or dad, or they help you look for a job, or they help you look for car insurance or help you make a resume or even just filling out the FAFSA.

KATIE COMBS PRICHARD OR CHRIS GRAY/SCOTT: That's it for this episode of The Placer Life. For more on programs that are available to youth aging out of foster care, visit www.placer.ca.gov/ChildWelfare and select Transition Aged Support.