

EUGENE, Ore. – Foster youth in Oregon lose vital support when they turn 18 and age out of the system. Many navigate adulthood without guidance, stable housing, or access to basic health care.

The transition from being in custody of the state to independent living happens abruptly and leaves foster youth without the safety net most young adults rely on. Without parents or advocates, youth aging out of care are left to navigate systems that were never built with them in mind.

The most recent data available states that in 2021, over 19,000 youth aged out of foster care in the United States, with over 260 being Oregonians. Without parents or a home to go to, those who age out are more vulnerable to homelessness and health issues, according to Alternative Family Service. AFS is a nonprofit organization that provides foster care, adoption and mental health services in California.

Stephanie Lambirth, the services manager for Riverfront School and Career Center with Looking Glass Community Services, oversees the Independent Living Program in Eugene. Through ILP, she works with foster youth ages 14-23, assisting them with housing, employment and life skills.

Lambirth said it's not motivation holding youth back from a stable life, but that "there's really a lack of health care resources and mental health resources. Until their basic needs are met... It's hard to sort of move on and address other things."

Abbigail Torres, a former foster youth living in Eugene, faces these problems firsthand. After aging out of Michigan's foster system, she moved to Oregon in 2021, hoping for better opportunities.

For Torres, even basic necessities were a struggle; "I just got a doctor like two days ago," she said. "And I'm 24. I've had no consistent health care since I aged out."

Affordable housing and mental health resources are another challenge. Lambirth said many youth are hesitant to live with roommates after years of placement changes and trauma, making it hard to find housing. To be eligible for Oregon's Independent Living Program, they require 36 hours of "productive activity," defined by employment, school, volunteerism or all three, which can be difficult for those recovering from instability.

When Torres aged out, she said it felt like the system abandoned her. "It was very not trauma-informed and brutal," she said. "Everybody's trying to tell you that you're the problem. Minimal resources. Bare minimum. And basically, you're on your own."

Displacement is also a barrier and can cause lasting mental health issues. A 2021 report by Street Roots said 41% of Oregon foster youth experienced three or more placements, and 15% had six or more. These moves disrupt schooling, health care and long-term mentorship.

Torres said one of the hardest parts of aging out is loneliness. Without family to fall back on, former foster youth need check-ins from trusted adults like "Hey, I'm going to be in town. Do you need a trip to the store? You got everything you need?"

She said too many youth are forgotten without someone asking these questions.