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Foster care worker describes system's troubles

Norwood calls for greater state support, programs

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By Maneesha Limaye

In honor of National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week, Amanda Norwood, housing advocate for Youth and Family Enrichment Services (YFES), spoke last night to a group of about 20 Stanford students on the problems of housing foster youth before and after emancipation.

Students Taking on Poverty (STOP) hosted the event, titled "After Foster Care: A Look Into the Lives of Homeless Youth in San Mateo County."

"We try to put on events and programs and campus awareness campaigns that increase knowledge about a whole variety of issues that relate to poverty in the U.S.," said STOP co-president Debbie Warshawsky '08, adding that foster care "is so often overlooked and neglected as a social issue."

Supported by a two-year funding grant from the state, YFES provides housing advocacy services for any youth previously or currently in San Mateo's foster care system.

"Housing is extremely expensive in the Bay Area and most of these kids work at minimum wage jobs," Norwood said. "It's nearly impossible for them to do it on their own."

She added that the consequences of homelessness for foster youth are far-reaching and perpetual.

"Not having affordable housing can mess up other aspects of their lives like school and work," she said. "Essentially, they are living in a state of continual chaos."

For those who are ready to live on their own, Norwood said she assisted clients all throughout the housing process.

"I explain what leases are, how to prepare for meetings with their landlords and basic advocacy," she said. "Lots of landlords don't want to rent to 18-year-olds and prefer the 40-year-old with a good credit history. They aren't supposed to discriminate, but they do, and I make sure that my clients' voices are heard."

She said, however, that most of the youth are not ready for the responsibilities that go along with taking care of themselves.

“We want them to make the most independent decision, but a lot of these young adults coming out of the system aren’t as equipped as they think they are to live independently,” Norwood said. “We show them what other options they have.”

Many of the better options are transitional programs, which house foster youth in groups of 10. She said, however, that the turnover rate can be problematic and living conditions are usually crowded.

Among other issues, Norwood mentioned that many of the youth do not have adequate knowledge about finances and contracts that are required to live on one’s own.

“Independent living is so much,” she said. “It’s not just about getting a paycheck or frying an egg. There are so many more skills that these youth need, but do not have.”

She said that there needs to be more accountability within the state to create programs that teach the youngsters about necessary life skills.

“You can say ‘teach kids budgeting,’ but what does that really mean? And how is it implemented?” Norwood asked. “There need to be state mandates that tell us how to better handle these issues.”

Alyssa Battistoni ‘08, STOP co-president, said she was happy with the student turnout.

“I thought it was really informative about an issue that is overlooked to a large extent,” Battistoni said. “The statistics Amanda mentioned are just stunning, and I am glad Stanford students want to be informed about this.”

The week’s events conclude today when a group of STOP members will travel to the Opportunity Center, a comprehensive homeless shelter that provides services such as transitional housing and medical care in Palo Alto. Students will provide two computer-training sessions to help the foster youth create email addresses and find tools to search for jobs online.

“Everything we do,” Warshawsky said, “is to try to increase access to information for low-income communities that enable them to fight for an improvement in their quality of life.”