

# Failed Adoptions Lead to More Homeless Youths

by **MERIBAH KNIGHT** | Dec 30, 2011

Lamar West has lost parents twice in his life. The first time was when he was 4; the second was a month before his 18th birthday. The circumstances differed, but the outcomes did not.

When West, 20, tries to remember his biological parents, his eyes close and his face goes still. He remembers his mother's name, Rochelle Griffin. Then he recalls a place — a hallway, an office — and fragments of conversation. "Records. Drug abuse. Termination."

At age 5, West was adopted from the Illinois child welfare system. His four siblings went elsewhere. Parental rights were terminated. His child welfare case was closed. His last name and birth certificate were changed, listing his adopter, Frankie Lee West, as his mother. He had a new family.

He lived in West's Roseland home with her and her eight other children (six of them were adopted) for years. But in 2008, he went to stay nearby with a family friend for a few months because West's new house on the Southwest Side had become too crowded. He remained in regular contact with her. Then, in January 2009, he went to her home and discovered it empty.

She had moved — "upped and went," as West said — to Atlanta. It was a month before he turned 18, and a month before the checks she received from the child welfare system on behalf of West were scheduled to stop.

"I've never felt pain like that before," West said of finding the empty house. "My heart was beating so fast. It was like someone was punching me from the inside of my chest."

West is what caseworkers and providers refer to as a "failed adoption." He is part of a growing group that is entering the local shelter system for homeless youths after their families vanish as quickly as the government checks attached to them do.

Anne Holcomb, West's caseworker and the coordinator for the Night Ministry's Open Door Youth Shelter, said she was dismayed by the increase in homeless cases resulting from adopted youths who reach 18, the standard cutoff age for adoption subsidies in Illinois.

"I'm definitely seeing more failed adoptions," she said. "I'm seeing more than I did in the '90s and even more over the last four years, because these youths were adopted as kids and now they're 18."

With one of the largest child-welfare systems in the nation, Illinois had 51,331 children in state care in 1997. Often they bounced from foster home to foster home. Each new placement can add a new layer of trauma, experts said.

That same year, President Bill Clinton called on states to double the number of adoptions and permanent placements in five years because a focus on permanency would help both children and state budgets. Adoptive families received state assistance and provided children with a place to call home, while removing them from state rosters and reducing the number of caseworkers.

Between fiscal years 1985 and 1994, 8,180 children were adopted from the Illinois foster care system; between 1995 and 2004, the number had soared to 36,212, according to the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services.

Today the emphasis on permanency has shrunk the system to 15,413 children in fiscal year 2011, from its 1997 peak.

Research shows that from 1988 to 2006, children were typically adopted at age 7. Now, a little more than a decade after the boom years of 1998 to 2001 — accounting for 22,057 adoptions — more youths are aging out of subsidies than ever before.

“There was a huge scramble to pressure people into permanency,” said Mark Ruckdaeschel, director of Neon Street Dorms, a homeless youths shelter in Uptown. “And there was a big discussion about the financial benefits for doing this. It was a selling point.”

Monthly subsidies range from \$360 for an infant to well over \$1,000 for a child with special needs.

While foster youths receive benefits until age 21, benefits for adopted youths expire at 18. Youths who are abandoned by their adoptive family at that point are often left homeless and without a safety net — even from the system responsible for their adoption.

“It’s frustrating,” said Ruckdaeschel, who previously worked for organizations contracted by the Illinois child welfare system. “You feel like you’re doing D.C.F.S.’s job without the backing of D.C.F.S.’s deep pockets.”

The suddenly homeless youths are legal adults and are considered outside the system’s responsibility. In fact, the agency’s responsibility can end even earlier.

“D.C.F.S. has no capacity to and no authority to monitor or track families after an adoption,” said Kendall Marlowe, a spokesman for the agency. Richard Calica took over as director of the agency on Dec. 15, and he was not available to comment for this article.

West, a reticent and soft-spoken young man, has been homeless since he discovered West’s house empty two years ago. He had one brief phone call with her, but she never offered to take him back, he said. West did not respond to e-mails asking for comment.

For a while, West and his girlfriend, Amanda, stayed with his longtime friend Rodney Carter, 39. They also spent time in homeless shelters. When they married in September, they moved in with Amanda’s parents and her brother; they have a 1-year-old daughter, Kayla, and are expecting another child. With six people in a one-bedroom apartment, tensions are high.

West recently started seasonal day labor work in the receiving department of Follett Educational Services. It does not pay much — about \$300 a week after the placement agency takes its cut — not enough to save for an apartment. He has no high school diploma and hopes to get his G.E.D., but for now he is the primary breadwinner and a paycheck is critical, he said.

Despite his anger toward his adoptive mother, West said he longed for the family he had known since he was 5.

When the push for permanency began 14 years ago, critics said that placements were being made in haste. They warned that children would eventually come flooding back into the system.

Limited research shows that about 90 percent of adoptions last through the child's 18th birthday, said Nancy Rolock, a senior research specialist at the University of Illinois at Chicago who studies permanency in the child-welfare system. Yet what happens after age 18, Rolock said, is nearly impossible to track.

D.C.F.S. is aware that not all placements are perfect matches. To prevent adoption failures, it has adoption-preservation programs, which tries to salvage an adoption before it breaks down.

In the last fiscal year, the programs served 1,318 families, which cost the department \$6,231,707. Of the 2,490 children involved, 35 were returned to the custody of the child-welfare system.

In 2009, the Illinois General Assembly passed the Foster Youth Successful Transition to Adulthood Act, which enabled former foster youths under the age of 21 to resume receiving benefits from D.C.F.S. It benefited youths who may have chosen to leave the agency early only to find out that life without its aid can be difficult. Yet the law does not include foster youths who have been adopted.

**Representative Sara Feigenholtz, a co-sponsor of the law, said its scope should be widened. "I believe that cherry-picking and hair-splitting doesn't get us where we want to be," she said. "I'm beginning to realize that there is a lot more work to be done."**

After a long day at his job, West collapsed in an armchair in his mother-in-law's Albany Park apartment. Kayla toddled around, giggling, eating a peeled apple. "I've been thinking about something all day," he said and rose to his feet.

He walked into the 8-foot-by-6-foot bedroom he shares with his wife and their daughter, sat on the bed and typed out a message on his mobile phone to Jennifer, his adopted sister, who left along with West.

"I'm asking this question to give myself closure. Am I a part of your family or not, honest?" Then he hit send.