

Foster aid could grow

ALBANY — State budget negotiations are underway that could expand a little-known state program that is making a dent in the obstacles faced by foster children trying to enter and graduate from college.

Since 2015, the state's Foster Youth College Success Initiative has provided services, including tutoring, counseling and financial aid, to help more than 350 students in the state's foster care system get into and graduate from 70 colleges statewide, advocates said.

"Those who grew up in the system are well aware that most youth age out of foster care without a parent or safety net," said Regina Calcaterra, attorney and author of books on foster care, including the memoir "Etched in Sand: A True Story of Five Siblings Who Survived an Unspeakable Childhood on Long Island."

"As a devastating consequence to that stark reality, they often end up on public assistance, homeless or incarcerated," said the Manhattan lawyer, who was a foster child.



"I always wanted to go to college since I was in the second grade and I was interested in the sciences and criminal law."

- Kimberly Alcequiez, Former Foster Youth Stony Brook University

A year ago, Kimberly Alcequiez was an honor student vying to be her Bronx high school's valedictorian and on her way to earning 15 college credits.

"I always wanted to go to college since I was in second grade and I was interested in the sciences and criminal law," she said in an interview.

Then came her senior year. She was removed from a threatening environment at home that put her in the hospital and was placed in foster care. Soon after, she became pregnant. With her savings diminishing and a baby to care for, college and a professional career seemed out of reach.

She was accepted at some of the top SUNY schools, but she couldn't complete the complex forms to verify her income, forms usually handled by parents, relatives or guardians.

That's where the Foster Youth College Success Initiative stepped in. It helped her complete her financial forms and explain her household finances, while also providing a lawyer for guidance, a stipend for food for her and her baby, and an introduction to an alumnus of Stony Brook University to help regain her place in the freshman class for the fall 2016 semester.

Now she's a sophomore, thanks to the 21 college credits she earned in high school and over last summer. She and her daughter, Kaitlyn, live in the family and graduate school dorms at Stony Brook, and the program keeps them fed and clothed.

"I was just surviving," said Alcequiez, now 19. "Now it's less stress on me and it's easier," she said. "I'm looking to major in history and minor in biology, and go to dental school or law school."

A 2010 University of Chicago study found that while most youth in foster care have the same aspirations for college as youths living with their families, "for far too many foster youth with these aspirations, a college education remains an unfulfilled dream." The research included a 2006 estimate that the college graduation rate of former foster youth was between 1 percent and 11 percent.

In New York, a group of foster care support groups are pushing the State Legislature and Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo to increase his proposed 2017-18 funding of \$1.5 million — flat since 2015 — to provide the services to hundreds more foster care youths. The group, known as the Foster Care Initiative, seeks \$4.5 million in the \$162.2 billion budget.

Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie (D-Bronx) and Assembly Higher Education Committee chairwoman Deborah Glick (D-Manhattan) created the program and used their political muscle to expand it.

“We knew that there were disadvantaged youth across this state who needed a boost to achieve their dreams of higher education and all of the opportunities that a college degree would afford them,” Heastie told Newsday. “Only about one out of every five foster children ever enroll at any kind of college or university and the ones that do often struggle to buy books and other necessities. The Assembly majority remains committed to supporting these children so they, too, can achieve successful futures alongside their peers.”

Glick said the program has a high retention rate for youths.

“These are the most needy students without any general support from families. This is crucial.”

Despite a slide in tax revenue and a threat of reduced federal aid under the Trump administration that has kept most areas of spending flat under Cuomo’s budget proposal, the governor has indicated he’s open to expanding the foster program in negotiations with Heastie and the legislature.

“This particular program is continued at 2016 levels and discussions continue with the legislature on how we can best help foster youth succeed in college within available resources,” said Morris Peters, Cuomo’s budget spokesman.