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## Help For Youths Leaving Foster Care

Michele Benedetto Neitz

*Golden Gate University School of Law*, [mneitz@ggu.edu](mailto:mneitz@ggu.edu)

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# Help for youths leaving foster care; [1,6,7 Edition]

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## **Abstract (Summary)**

In response to these needs, San Diego's emancipated youths are now benefiting from a cutting-edge legal project designed to target the legal needs of this population. With the support of Equal Justice Works, a national fellowship program, and Morrison & Foerster, LLP, a prominent national law firm with offices here in San Diego, the Legal Aid Society of San Diego has developed the Youth Outreach Project. This project is the first legal services program in the nation to provide direct civil legal services specifically to emancipated youths and youths aging out of foster care. As an Equal Justice Works fellow, I coordinate the Youth Outreach Project full-time; the program also benefits from the expertise of LASSD staff and the generosity of many attorney and non- attorney volunteers, who donate their legal services to these youths through the LASSD Pro Bono Program.

## **Full Text (638 words)**

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The film of the story of Antwone Fisher -- the foster child who suffered extensive abuse and neglect in the system before ultimately succeeding in the Navy -- has rightly generated much controversy about the state of America's foster care system. However, former foster youths like Antwone are struggling locally in San Diego County.

Approximately 400 youths age out of San Diego's foster-care system every year. As young people in a border city, San Diego's foster youths face a combination of issues when they leave foster care: for example, lack of affordable housing, language barriers, diverse family structures and a critical gap in legal assistance.

When they turn 18, foster-care youths in San Diego County are provided considerably more support than that given to Antwone, who received \$67 and was driven to a men's shelter. San Diego youths receive Independent Living Skills services, which includes some housing assistance, job training and education support. However, because the needs of youths are greater than the resources available, many youths fail to receive or benefit from such services.

In late 2002, the PBS documentary "Emancipation Day" examined the lives of foster youths leaving the system, and discovered an overwhelming need for legal assistance for former foster youths. Nationwide, 40 percent of all foster children will become homeless within 12 months of their 18th birthday. Similarly, the most important legal issue faced by emancipating youth in San Diego is homelessness.

Sadly, many of San Diego's former foster-care youths are presently or formerly homeless. For some, their car will become their permanent home. Others will couch-surf with friends while they wait out the three- to nine-month waiting list for one of the county's few transitional homes. Those who cannot obtain transitional housing sleep under freeways, out of sight. Tragically, many will never find permanent shelter.

In response to these needs, San Diego's emancipated youths are now benefiting from a cutting-edge legal project designed to target the legal needs of this population. With the support of Equal Justice Works, a

national fellowship program, and Morrison & Foerster, LLP, a prominent national law firm with offices here in San Diego, the Legal Aid Society of San Diego has developed the Youth Outreach Project. This project is the first legal services program in the nation to provide direct civil legal services specifically to emancipated youths and youths aging out of foster care. As an Equal Justice Works fellow, I coordinate the Youth Outreach Project full-time; the program also benefits from the expertise of LASSD staff and the generosity of many attorney and non- attorney volunteers, who donate their legal services to these youths through the LASSD Pro Bono Program.

Through outreach clinics in drop-in centers and soup kitchens, the Youth Outreach Project is providing legal services directly to emancipated youth and youth who age out of foster care. The legal needs of the youth vary widely, from major housing and education issues to simple parking ticket disputes. Additionally, many youth are victims of identity theft, often perpetrated by their own biological parents.

For many youths leaving foster care, the first few years on their own are the most critical. In an effort to prevent these young people from slipping back into the system, the attorneys in the Youth Outreach Project assist them to overcome their legal problems preventing them from achieving their goals. As the story of Antwone Fisher demonstrates clearly, former foster youths can succeed if given the opportunity. With the support of San Diegans, the Youth Outreach Project's creative approach to legal problem solving will enable these youths to achieve their potential.

Benedetto, an attorney, is coordinator of the Legal Aid Society of San Diego's Youth Outreach Program. She can be reached via e- mail at [MicheleB@lassd.org](mailto:MicheleB@lassd.org).

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