Unemployed and fresh out of the foster care system, Sharnae Goslee hoped to enroll in a job training program the day she arrived in Baltimore by bus from the Eastern Shore two years ago.

But with no birth certificate or high school transcript, she could not apply to the program. Instead of landing a job, she ended up homeless — sleeping in shelters, on the couches of people she barely knew and sometimes in abandoned houses. She spent hours walking the streets with nowhere to go. She sold her food stamps to pay her phone bill so potential employers could call, but they never did.

"You lose everything," Goslee said about aging out of the foster care system at age 21; she entered it when she was 3. "You lose your support system and everything all at once when you age out."
Social workers and homeless advocates say Goslee's story is all too common among young people on the Eastern Shore who have aged out of the foster care system and must fend for themselves. Some, like her, leave because there are few resources there to help them transition to living on their own. Whether they leave or remain, they often end up homeless after a few months because they lack a support system.

Social workers say they reflect a growing and troubling trend of homeless youth considered too old to be wards of the state but who aren't quite ready to be on their own. Often jobless or underemployed, these young adults have become an almost invisible segment of the homeless population.

The problem is even thornier on the Eastern Shore, where there are fewer resources to address foster care transition and homelessness than in urban areas like Baltimore.

Hoping to prevent foster children from ending up in unstable living conditions, a group of social services agencies from around the state, led by The Institute for Innovation & Implementation at the University of Maryland School of Social Work, is using a $2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to tackle the issue in five Eastern Shore counties.

"We want to create a better bridge from foster care to living independently outside of the system," said April Sharp, director of the Talbot County Department of Social Services. "This grant will enable us to put into place resources that will fit the need of youth in our rural regions to help them be successful and not homeless."

The Maryland Department of Human Resources, several local health departments and the National Center on Housing and Child Welfare are also part of the effort.

Rural homelessness is different from the homelessness found in urban areas such as Baltimore, Sharp and others who work in Eastern Shore communities say. While some rural homeless may live in abandoned buildings or cars, or in encampments deep in the woods, others "couch-surf" — bouncing around from place to place, staying briefly at the homes of friends or distant relatives — as they seek a more stable situation.

These tenuous living arrangements make it difficult to determine the true number of homeless youths on the Eastern Shore, much less track the extent of their homelessness or their whereabouts.

"People on the Shore don't even realize we have a homeless issue," said Jeanine Beasley, continuum care coordinator for Mid-Shore Mental Health Systems Inc., which is part of the collaborative. "We don't have a very large street homeless population that people can see."

Former foster children may end up homeless for a variety of reasons. Some lack a family support system or don't feel close enough to relatives to seek help. And they enter a job market where declining
industries such as timber, farming and manufacturing have left a limited number of jobs and high unemployment.

Fewer resources for the homeless exist on the Eastern Shore than in places like Baltimore, where food banks and other social services organizations assist that population. And the spread-out nature of the Eastern Shore makes it hard for people to get to the services that are available.

Many find themselves leaving the area in search of better job opportunities but then feeling isolated, cut off from what little foundation they once had.

When Xavia Palmer turned 21 and aged out of the foster care system two years ago, she left the Eastern Shore for the Washington suburbs, hoping for a better chance at finding a job.

She discovered that the transition to adult life was not easy. She could barely afford her $1,000-a-month rent on the entry-level wage she earned at a museum job. About the same time, her biological father died, leaving her grief-stricken, even though she didn't grow up with him.

"I was down and depressed because I wasn't sure I could live on my own," Palmer said.

She finally found some stability when a friend in Prince George's County rented her a room so she could save for her own place, and she found a job in customer service for Southwest Airlines.

Many young adults with a foster care background don't know about or won't use shelters, food banks and other services, which makes them difficult to serve or track.

The new initiative, dubbed Thrive@25, builds on efforts already underway on the Eastern Shore to help foster care youth.

The University of Maryland and its partners spent the past two years trying to gain a better understanding of the youth homeless community through interviews, surveys, focus groups and data analysis. About 99 percent of the former foster youths interviewed had stayed in a shelter or with a friend or relative since leaving foster care. The young people generally were able to pay rent for the first three months after leaving foster care before things seemed to fall apart.

Using the data, the partners also created a tool to determine a former foster child's risk of falling into homelessness. They will test the tool further with the new grant money and determine if it could be used statewide.

They also will expand a job program and look at ways to expand services on the Eastern Shore and help foster kids develop relationships with family members, even if they are not close.
"What is key to any young adult to be successful is that you have a network, a safety net of individuals," Sharp said. You need "people you can turn to when you get stuck or in a bind, or are trying to navigate things like how to buy your first car or choose the right insurance plan."

There currently are programs to help foster care kids transition. For instance, Palmer received state assistance to help with rent, was taught about saving and had a plan for living on her own.

"I still ran into different money problems — not saving my money, not managing my money well, not making the right choices," Palmer said. "I have learned from my mistakes, and I am getting better with money management."

The new grant will beef up what is already available for foster kids.

"It is not that they are being discharged into homelessness directly," said Deborah S. Harburger of The Institute for Innovation & Implementation. "The plans don't have enough legs and youth don't have enough tools or resources to keep the plans going."

Goslee also participated in an independent-living program for foster children. She was enrolled in school but had trouble paying her bills and keeping her grades up.

After losing hope of finding a job in Baltimore, Goslee called her biological father, with whom she had a distant relationship. He agreed she could live with him back on the Eastern Shore.

She now makes her home in Salisbury, where she works as a sales associate and still struggles to make ends meet. Goslee splits rent with a friend. She has turned to nonprofits and churches for help paying her utility and other bills. She often fears she could end up homeless again.

"I worry all the time," Goslee said. "I stress out all the time."

amcdaniels@baltsun.com
twitter.com/ankwalker

Copyright © 2016, The Baltimore Sun

This article is related to: Homelessness, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program