A Voice from the Field on HB 906

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Those of us who advocated for this legislation could have easily called it the “Toni B” or the “Michael R” Bill. As I advocated for HB906, I was thinking about Toni, Michael, and so many other children who appeared before me during my 16 years on the Juvenile Court Bench.

These were children who kept me awake at night. I worried about where to place them and what would happen to them when they turned 18 — or, as we said in the child welfare world, “aged out of care.” Toni, Michael and so many other children were not among those who would be adopted or who could ever be returned to their parents or family members. Like every other judge who had such children before her, I knew if we could not help them they would likely become homeless adults or imprisoned adults because of their untreated mental illnesses.

Toni B came into care when she was four years old after being brutally sexually abused by her father and an uncle. When she first appeared before me she had been in and out of several placements, including many psychiatric placements. Michael was adopted with his four siblings but due to his mental illness was feared by his adopted parents. The parents and his siblings all slept in one room with a dead bolt on the door to keep Michael from harming them. His adopted family spent thousands of dollars and thousands of hours trying to keep him in their home with his siblings. His aberrant behavior escalated to not only placing his family in danger but also endangering the children in his special needs class.

This bill was written for children such as Toni and Michael, and so many others who reach age 18 yet are still in custody of the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS). Both Toni and Michael signed themselves back into state custody and as a result have continued to receive the services and support they need to live independently. These services, however, had to be paid for with philanthropic dollars raised by the nonprofit organizations that provided this care. This legislation will allow the state to pull down federal Title IV-E dollars for young adults like Toni and Michael who are between the ages of 18 and 21 and in DFCS custody. This will in turn allow agencies such as MAAC, Hillside, Creative Communities, Chris 180 and Devereux to not have to use their charitable dollars to provide continuing care for them.

As a judge I often said, “We either pay for the care of these children now or we pay later.” Of course, paying later means we have lost the child to the system and the cycle of dependency will continue. The IV-E dollars from HB 906 can be used for room, board and care, while charitable funds can be used for job training, education and so much more. All these additional transition support services can lead to both a productive and fulfilling life for those who otherwise might have fallen off track at a critical point.