We are abandoning children in foster care

By Rita Soronen
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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Rita Soronen: Each year, 23,439 children "age out" of foster care at 18 with no resources
- Soronen: Tens of thousands were taken away from their parents after extreme abuse
- Soronen: Trauma, multiple moves, neglect put them at high risk for a grim future
- She says we promised them a family; it's unacceptable they end up without one

Editor's note: Rita Soronen is the president and CEO of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. Since 2001, Soronen has worked to find adoptive families for each of the more than 134,000 waiting children in the U.S. and Canadian foster care systems. The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of the author.

(CNN) -- In 2012 in the United States, 23,439 children in foster care turned 18 and were "emancipated" or "aged out." In simple terms, most of them were put out into the world on their own without housing, financial assistance or emotional support.

Take Adrian, now 27. After being placed into foster care at 6 because of his mother's drug and alcohol abuse, he stayed in care, moving from home to home, until he was 18 and too old for the system. He found the strength to try to put himself through college, using the county van his caseworker helped secure to move there.
His roommate got to go home on school breaks and had a mother who called to check in on him. Adrian had no one to call when he struggled at school -- nowhere to call home, no one to send a gift, no one to see how he was doing. He worked nearly 60 hours a week just to pay for college, and when eventually his grades slipped, he was kicked out. He struggled with the ups and downs of depression. As Adrian said of children in foster care: "We are not equipped to go through this world alone."

In 2012, U.S. authorities received more than 3.3 million reports of abuse, representing about 6 million children, or 8% of the child population. From those reports, after investigation and intervention, about 400,000 children were placed in foster care, and of those, nearly 60,000 were permanently taken away from their families of origin. These are children who were neglected or abused by parents -- physically or sexually or both -- so egregiously that a judge permanently severed the parents' rights to claim the children as their own. Terminating, or legally ending, the right of parent to raise a child is not something a judge decides lightly. In fact, parents receive every legal, social and system opportunity to keep their families intact -- too often putting the child at risk of emotional or physical harm. Because we know that children thrive in families -- not institutions or transient, temporary care -- we made a promise to those children. We promised the day they were permanently separated from their families that we would find them new ones. A place to call home, to be loved, supported and cherished, as every child should.

Rita Soronen

We failed 23,439 children last year, and legally emancipated them from care. This world is not an easy place for children to grow and thrive on their own. Too often it is not even safe place. Make no mistake, many dedicated and skilled adults step forward to care for these children, as their social workers, counselors or temporary foster parents. Some even stay connected once a child leaves care. And some states have worked hard to extend foster care to 21, but resources for older youth are limited and difficult to access. A Health and Human Services report found that the federal Foster Care Independence program meant to help foster children make the transition to adulthood is inconsistent from state to state and provides too little for these troubled young people. And it simply is not a substitute for a family. Considering the trauma these children have endured at a young age, the moves from foster family to foster family and the abandonment they feel, it's no wonder they are at a higher risk for a grim future. Conservative studies find one in five will become homeless after 18; at 24, only half will be employed; less than 3% will have earned a college degree; 71% of women will be pregnant by 21; and one in four will have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder at twice the rate of United States war veterans. And too often, many are at risk of moving back into government systems -- from juvenile centers to prison. Renee, now 25, was young when her mother became addicted to drugs and could no longer care for her and her brother. They were placed in foster care, moved around within the system, and eventually aged out. She had nowhere to go after foster care.
Now on her own as a young adult, she's facing obstacles that could have been avoided. Renee told me that, "For children who have never been on their own before, they're really in a bad situation once those first few months of support stops. If I can't pay a bill, who's going to help me pay it? I had to be a trailblazer, that's all I knew. It was a survival tactic. I still feel like I don't have any guidance. Everything for me is trial and error, and I hate that."

And for Dante, it was really very simple: "I just wanted a family and a home," he said. After nearly 12 years, he left foster care with neither.

There is a cycle of violence and helplessness innate in the lives of the hundreds of thousands of children in the U.S. foster care system. And yet millions of Americans are unaware that thousands of children remain in this cycle, and those charged with their protection fail to commit to better solutions for educational and vocational support, employment, life skills training and secure homes.

It is our duty as a nation to end this cycle. We made promises to these 101,000 children in foster care waiting to be adopted that we would find them safe, supportive homes. We must take the lead and work harder to do that. If children have been permanently separated from their families and freed for adoption, it's unacceptable that they end up without one.

April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month and is followed in May by National Foster Care Month. Take these opportunities to call your U.S. representative or senator, speak with your state representatives or write a letter to your governor to urge them to focus on the foster care system to make the health, safety and welfare of children in their states an uncompromised priority.

We can make the life of each and every American child a cause for celebration and joy. We must demand justice and safety at every level for children, not only because it is their basic human right but because those who grow and learn in just environments and with the protection of families ultimately create humane and thriving societies as adults.