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Anne Tolley supports campaign to raise the age of Foster Care to 21

Over 13,000 people have shown their support in a nationwide campaign urging the government to raise the age of leaving state care from 17 to 21.

The 'We Don't Stop Caring' campaign was launched in September as a collaborative effort of Lifewise, Dingwall Trust, Youthline, Child Poverty Action Group, Action Station and agencies from all around the country.

Today, to formally hand over the petition to the House of Representatives, Social Development Minister Anne Tolley met with Lifewise General Manager Moira Lawler.

"When youth lose support at 17, they are not engaged in conversation about what will happen next," says Lifewise General Manager Moira Lawler. "If you're not with a foster family who wants to continue looking after you, you're given your stuff and are moved on."

In New Zealand, young people currently leave state care on their 17th birthday – an age when they can't even sign a tenancy agreement.

Minister Anne Tolley is currently awaiting the advice of the Modernising Child Youth and Family Expert Panel. The panel was established in April and their report will be submitted later this month.

Lifewise have been working to raise the leaving age of foster care, in collaboration with other social agencies around New Zealand. "This campaign has been launched at a time when there is a strong understanding within government that something needs to change within CYFS (Child, Youth and Family Services)," says Moira.

"Over the past two days alone we've seen more than 4,000 people add their name to this petition and the total number of signatories now stands at over 13,000," says Action Station Campaign Director Laura O'Connell-Rapira. "The public appetite for change is there, now we need our politicians to act."

Most families in New Zealand support their children well past 17, with most Kiwis now leaving home at around the age of 23. Those who leave the nest often come back for support if times get tough, but that isn't the case for young people raised in the state care system.

Jasmine, who will turn 17 in February, has been in state care since she was 13. She says raising the age of leaving foster care from 17 to 21 would be a lot better. "I'll be an adult then," she says, adding that financial difficulties have been her biggest challenge.

Growing up in Auckland, Jasmine was taken into CYFS care when community members noticed her single father was no longer able to take care of Jasmine and her siblings.

Jasmine was eventually separated from her siblings and spent time with different caregivers. Her older sister is now her legal guardian and they are both looking for stable housing and jobs.

Although Jasmine is happy she will soon become more independent, she feels other youth need more help.

Raising the age of foster care from 17 to 21 will provide the same level of care as a reasonable parent. With better support, more young people will be able to make the transition to adulthood successfully, with long-term economic, social and health benefits for New Zealand's society.

Suggestions for improving CYFS were included in today's meeting with Minister Tolley. "We presented ideas of ways of working with families that support them safely, and enables them to progress in a healthy and safe way," says Moira.

"There's a common misconception that foster children have done something wrong, when really, they're innocent bystanders in family dysfunction," she says. "We thank everyone who has signed the petition, and we look forward to a positive response from the government."

For more information on Lifewise's work, visit www.lifewise.org.nz

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