

<https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/crime-courts/2026/01/16/in-state-care-but-hungry-young-adults-in-foster-care-say-alaska-agency-doesnt-provide-for-basic-needs/>

## **In state care but hungry: Young adults in foster care say Alaska agency doesn't provide for basic needs**

By [Michelle Theriault Boots](#)

Published: January 16, 2026



Starlin Maier, a UAA student who is in OCS foster care custody, doesn't get money to provide food for herself because she lives in the university dorms and says she has a hard time paying for necessities. Facing Foster Care, which represents Maier and others, is suing OCS to provide young adults living in dorms or other housing with the same stipends for living expenses that traditional foster families get. (Marc Lester / ADN)

Over winter break, Starlin Maier ran out of food.

Maier, an 18-year-old with pastel streaked hair and a love for anime-influenced art, is a full-time college student at the University of Alaska Anchorage. She lives in the dorms.

She's also in custody of the state of Alaska's Office of Children's Services.

In Alaska, young people in foster care who aren't adopted or reunited with their families when they turn 18 are eligible to stay in state custody until they turn 21. The idea is that vulnerable teenagers need help transitioning to independent adult lives.

But those, like Maier, who live in settings other than licensed foster homes don't receive the monthly payments licensed foster parents do for food, toiletries, clothes and other essentials.

Advocates say that leaves them destitute and struggling to get by at a time when the state has promised to provide for their basic needs.

Last week, a nonprofit advocacy group representing foster youths, Facing Foster Care in Alaska, sued OCS and the Alaska Department of Family and Community Services, asserting that the state isn't fulfilling its obligation to provide financial support for all youths in its care. [The lawsuit](#) asks the state to extend similar payments to foster youths living independently as it would to foster home providers.

#### ADVERTISEMENT

"The state must provide for the basic needs of all foster youth in its custody," the complaint filed by attorneys for the Northern Justice Project says. "Its failure to do so is both unconscionable and unconstitutional."

Maier said she was quickly broke after the fall semester started. The situation reached a crisis point over the long winter break, when food services closed and Maier had no money for groceries — and no family safety net to turn to.

She described getting a grocery voucher from a hospital. A nonprofit paid for an Uber ride so she could get to the store.

"Why is it any different (for me) than a kid in a foster home?" Maier said.

#### **Struggling to get by**

In written answers to questions, the Office of Children's Services said that young adults living outside of licensed foster homes "are supported through separate funding streams rather than foster care stipends."

Young adults in OCS custody "have access to the same funding streams available to younger children, along with additional funding streams meant specifically for those preparing for adulthood," the agency said in the statement.

That's just not true, said Amanda Metivier, the executive director of Facing Foster Care in Alaska, the nonprofit advocacy organization led by foster youth that's the plaintiff in the lawsuit against the state.

The independent living funds OCS is referring to are federal grants not meant to cover cost of living, but rather other educational purposes such as driver's education, Metivier said. And they amount to far less than the foster care monthly stipends, annually.

The funds received by older foster youths living independently — grants of between \$3,000 to \$5,000 per year depending on circumstances — do not cover the cost of living, Metivier said.



Starlin Maier, left, talks with Amanda Metivier, executive director of Facing Foster Care in Alaska, at UAA on Jan. 12. (Marc Lester / ADN)

“Simply put, \$3,000 dollars does not cover the basics of living,” the lawsuit contends. “In real terms, this means youth must decide between a driver’s education program and an emergency food voucher.”

The amount of those grants has been stagnant for decades, Metivier said.

For many years, young adults in foster care have been struggling to get by, she said. “This is a longstanding issue.”

As of early January, 112 young adults between 18 and 21 were in state foster care custody, according to OCS. Of those, about half were living somewhere other than a licensed foster home or group home, the agency said.

Licensed foster homes receive stipends for each child in their care. Those stipends can run between \$1,200 or more per month for older foster youths, according to rates published by OCS.

“This stipend is meant to provide food, shelter, personal grooming items (like toothbrushes), modest clothing replacements, school supplies, books and toys, and transportation money,” the complaint in the Facing Foster Care lawsuit against OCS says. The state considers the money reimbursement for foster home expenses.

The state is obligated to similarly provide for the basic needs of youths in foster care, including extended foster care, Metivier said.

“Youth who are on the brink of being adults, who are highly vulnerable (and) are likely to end up homeless,” are the ones living in alternative settings, she said. “They really should be using that time to get ready, to figure out their career path or higher education.”

But “they’re still struggling, because they need food,” she said.

*[From 2022: [Aging out of Alaska’s foster care system on his own terms](#)]*

OCS in the statement officials emailed Thursday contends that the agency “routinely provides” youths still in state custody everything from food and clothing vouchers to bus passes to help with cellphones, laptops, work clothing and beyond.

“Young adults are urged to reach out for support whenever they feel they need it,” the agency said. OCS officials also said they employ seven people who focus solely on helping youths with independent living.

Metivier says that’s hardly enough for the number of youths who qualify for those programs, who number around 800 and includes kids as young as 16.

It’s also not always a choice to live independently, Maier said. For her, she said, “there was no home.”

**‘Just not right’**



Starlin Maier is a UAA student who is in OCS foster care custody, doesn't get money to provide food for herself because she lives in the university dorms and says she has a hard time paying for necessities. (Marc Lester / ADN)

Maier grew up in Meadow Lakes, mostly in the care of her grandmother. From age 8 to about age 12, she was in and out of North Star Behavioral Health, a for-profit psychiatric residential treatment center for children. She spent ages 12 through 16 in juvenile detention. Soon after she returned home, she was removed from the home by the Office of Children's Services and entered foster care.

For a time, she bounced between emergency foster placements that lasted only a few days, sometimes packing her belongings into garbage bags, a "sad thing," she said. Because foster homes are in short supply generally and in particular for older teenagers, it wasn't easy for the state to find Maier somewhere long-term to live.

As of November, OCS had 2,493 youths in need of placement, and only 1,184 licensed foster homes statewide, according to the lawsuit. In general, it's much harder to find older teens home placements than babies, toddlers and younger kids, said Metivier.

Right now, there are 116 foster home beds available for young adults up to 21 statewide, according to OCS.

“Capacity does not always translate into actual placement options,” OCS said in its statement. “Foster parents are not required to accept any specific young adult, and these young adults are not required to accept a foster home placement. This dynamic often creates a gap between theoretical availability and placement stability.”

For Maier, the longer-term foster homes she lived in didn’t work out. At one point, Maier said, she lived with a manager from her job at the mall. Eventually, she hit the end of the road: Her caseworker told her she could move into the UAA dorms or a youth shelter, she said.

At 17, Maier, who graduated from online high school with a 3.8 GPA by the time she was 16, agreed to move into the dorms. She is taking art and social work classes, advocating with Facing Foster Care in Alaska, and making friends.

But it’s hard and embarrassing to not be able to contribute to dorm basics like paper towels, to borrow cough syrup from friends when she’s sick and to rely on gift cards and taxi vouchers over breaks, she said. During the holidays, she ended up getting a \$150 food voucher from a hospital.

“That’s just not right,” she said.

Maier speaks regularly on her experiences in foster care, youth incarceration and institutionalization to audiences of professionals. She hopes someday to work for Facing Foster Care in Alaska.

It bugs her, she said, when people focus on the sad stories of foster youths, not how much they’ve overcome.

She’s overcome a lot, she said. “I hope nobody else has to deal with this or go through this.”

### **Michelle Theriault Boots**

Michelle Theriault Boots is a longtime reporter for the Anchorage Daily News. She focuses on stories about the intersection of public policy and Alaskans' lives. Before joining the ADN in 2012, she worked at daily newspapers on the West Coast and earned a master's degree from the University of Oregon.