

Undocumented Americans: Legislative Perspective Outline

HOST INTRO: For a variety of reasons, kids in foster care don't always have their birth certificates or social security cards. That can be a big problem when it comes to trying to get a driver's license or get a job. When it comes to making sure kids in foster care have all their identification, some of those best suited to improve that system are those who lived through it: former foster kids. And as The Texas Standard's Becky Fogel reports they're working to shape Texas policies to make sure others like them don't get lost in the shuffle.

Tymothy Belseth's house in Pflugerville is full of life. Literally. Tymothy, or Tym, has three cockatiels, two aquariums with fish, two cats, and one dog.

CUT: [Bring in Ambi] Come on Boris, be nice, be nice. His name's Boris, he's a pretty big german shepherd, he's about 100 pounds..."

He shares this mini version of Noah's Ark with his wife. Photos of the happy pair dot the kitchen fridge and the living room mantle.

CUT: "So here are my mother and father-in-law, and that's me, my wife, we're at the inner space caverns right there in Georgetown.

There are also photos of his nieces and nephews...all on his wife's side. Tym doesn't have photos of his birth family...

CUT: "And it's hard ya know because I have 10 siblings that I know of. And ya know, I don't get to see that, and so seeing my nieces and nephews growing up, I mean that's about the age when the separation happened and I entered foster care."

Tym's 28. He met his wife in South Texas when he was 15, after entering foster care. The high school sweethearts bonded over their similar personalities and love of music...specifically, death metal. He still has the guitar he saved up to buy when he was 17.

CUT: "...satin black: made for death metal."

It was, in small part, music that motivated Tym to get a hold of his birth certificate and social security card, two vital documents he didn't have. But why did this long-haired, death metal loving teenager need them? Because without them, he couldn't work, and save up to buy his first car -- a 1987 Camaro -- that he would ultimately drive to band practice.

CUT: "When I talked to my caseworker I was told that they would get it, and they never did get it."

So, Tym got to work. He managed to get a copy of his social security card from his biological mom. Since he was born outside of Texas, he enlisted his grandmother to pick up his birth certificate at an Iowa courthouse. The entire process took 5 months. When he told his caseworker he'd managed to get both documents. She offered to hold onto them until he turned 18...Tym was like...thanks, but no thanks.

CUT: "So no, I wasn't going to give them up after it was a process to get them at 16 years old."

Beyond going to band practice, these documents were a doorway to Tym's future. He was able to use the state college tuition waiver for former foster kids. He went to undergrad at Texas A&M Kingsville, then got a masters degree, and eventually a job at the state agency that oversees foster care - the Department of Family and Protective Services, or DFPS.

Today, he's a researcher at the Texas Institute for Child and Family Wellbeing at the University of Texas at Austin. There, he develops policies aimed at improving the lives of foster youth.

But policies can't get far without the backing of lawmakers. Enter, State Representative Stephanie Klick, a Fort Worth Republican.

CUT: "Kids that age out of care that do not have their identity documents are far more likely to be homeless or victims of human trafficking. If you want to get a job even at McDonald's you've got to show I.D."

For Klick, this is also personal.

CUT: "One thing your listeners may not know, is I actually was in foster care as a child and aged out so I have a very keen interest in these issues."

Klick is the eldest of 4 kids. She entered the system when she was about 8 years old. Her parents had gotten divorced in the late 1960s, early 1970s. And her mother struggled with mental health issues. Klick's foster mom was a teacher at her school, and that family showed her they were in it for the long haul.

Klick: They were very much interested to know what my goals in life were and how they could help me achieve those goals."

Part of that was making sure Klick had the documents she needed.

CUT: "I had foster brothers and sisters that were close in age and it was the same checklist for me as it was for them, getting your driver's license, being able to drive, being able to get a summer job, start taking the ACT or SAT to apply for college. I actually graduated from high school a year early."

But Klick also says, it was just easier to get identification documents back then.

CUT: “It used to be that we didn’t our social security cards until we started work as a part-time summer job when we were teens. Now, kids get those almost at birth. It was a lot easier to get documents then, than it is today because we’re worried about identity theft.”

Klick has been working on legislation that helps ensure foster youth get these in hand before they age out.

Take last legislative session. She pushed through a measure that requires courts and attorney ad litem -- that’s someone appointed by a court to advocate on behalf of a child -- to ensure kids have all their identification documents. Essentially, this made more people involved in a foster child’s life *officially* responsible for making sure they leave the system with the BIG THREE: a birth certificate, a social security card, and a state id.

CUT: “It puts everybody on the hook for what kids need, not just one person.”

This session, Klick is back at it. This time, she’s teaming up with State Representative James White, a Hillister Republican. They filed a new bill that would make it easier for kids in Texas foster care to get identification, especially when they don’t have a permanent address. White was never in the Texas foster care system like Tym and Klick, but he wants to make sure foster youth are supported. That’s what his parents did for him, and that’s what he wants to make sure the state does for kids in foster care.

CUT: “There’s literally nothing you can do without the appropriate identification in order to take advantage of all the great opportunities in this great state of Texas in civil life: you need an ID.”

It’s hard to tell how many kids this type of legislation would affect. DFPS doesn’t currently track how many kids age out of foster care without one or all of their identification documents. BUT, DFPS officials did tell me they plan to start keeping track.

Still, Tym Belseth says this isn’t a numbers game.

CUT: What matters to me is what happens to those who don’t get it. And we know, we know the outcomes are poor because their options are limited, and they can’t enter society like we all can. They don’t have the same playbook.

What these former foster youth are trying to do now that they’re researchers and lawmakers is rewrite the playbook so that foster kids have a level playing field.

In Austin, I’m Becky Fogel for the Texas Standard.
