

At Long Last: My Own Place!

By Angi

I was living in a foster home last fall when one day I told my social worker that I would like to live on my own. Even though I brought it up suddenly, I had thought about it carefully before I told my social worker.

I wanted to try it because a lot of people I know are in Independent Living (IL) apartments and they told me how good it is. Another reason was that I've been in care for a very long time and I was sick of foster and group homes.

To my surprise, my social worker told me there was an apartment available. She asked me if I was sure that's what I wanted, and I told her yes, even though I wasn't really sure. I felt ready for it on the outside, but on the inside I wasn't ready to be on my own.

Free at Last

Another reason I jumped at the chance was I didn't want to lose the apartment. If I didn't make up my mind fast, somebody else would have gotten it and I would have been put on a waiting list.

I was so excited, I just couldn't wait to move from my foster home into my new apartment. I was looking forward to feeling free.

My agency told me I would move in on a Friday, but at the last minute, they canceled it. They told me they'd move me on Monday, but I was crushed. I thought they were never gonna move me.

Finally, on Monday, December 9th, I moved into an apartment in Rego Park, Queens. Two workers from my old agency helped me move. It was a fun day because I was happy about moving, but also because the workers helping me were telling jokes and being silly.

What I like most about being in my own place is I don't have to worry about anybody being on my back about anything. Even though I don't have a curfew, I don't abuse it. I live life just like I did when I lived with my foster mother. I don't stay out late much and I do everything I'm supposed to do, like going to work at the magazine and my volunteer job, going to my agency for group sessions, and keeping my doctor and therapy appointments.

A Big Apartment

For me, the big difference in living in an apartment is the quiet-not hearing people arguing constantly. At my foster home, my foster mother would have an argument with

her daughter just because her daughter was going out. I mean, come on—the girl is 20 years old!

Even so, I loved my last foster family a lot more than my other ones. (I lived in two group homes and four foster homes between the ages of 14 and 19.) I still sometimes miss them 'cause they were there for me when I needed them.

Where I live now, the neighborhood is nice and quiet. My apartment is in a six-story building that is nicely painted and clean. My apartment is big, with two bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, and nice furniture. My agency pays for the rent and utilities.

When I was in my apartment the first few weeks I didn't have a roommate yet, and it was a little scary. When the time came for me to go to sleep the first night, I was so scared I had to sleep with the hallway light on. Since I got a roommate, things are different. I'm not scared at night now, but it was more comfortable when I was alone and had my privacy.

Another reason I feel scared is because while I'm in Independent Living I have to figure out what I'm gonna do when I age out—whether I'll move back with my biological family or into my own apartment where I'll have to pay the rent. I'm 19 and I'll age out at 21, so it's not far off. If I don't think about these things now and work and save money, then I'm in big trouble.

But I'm not gonna let worrying about the future drive me crazy. My social worker got me into a good Independent Living agency that has lots of programs and lets you stay for 18 months. (Some other IL programs are shorter.) When my agency says they'll help you with something, they actually do. They're not like some agencies that say they'll help you and only do half.

Important Skills

My social worker is teaching me lots of things I need to know, like how to budget and save, open a bank account, and write a check. The agency is also helping me find work. I'm learning job skills, including how to go apply for a job, how to present myself on a job interview, and how to write a resume. They're teaching me important things that I need to know about living on my own.

They also give me money for food shopping, clothes, and petty cash. For example, if I go out to the movies, they'll give me back the money that I spend. As for an allowance, only those who are in school get that. I don't think it's fair, but that's their rules.

Many things about Independent Living are not new to me. I used to learn about IL in my old agency. But at the time I never really paid any mind to it. Now I've come to realize it's very important to know about these things. If I don't, I could wind up having a lot of trouble in the future.

The agency's rules are not bad. You're not allowed to invite guys over to the apartment, and once a week they do surprise visits to see how well you're doing and how responsible you are living in an apartment. That's it.

This doesn't bother me because you're allowed to have friends over. Sometimes they get on your back about things like appointments and if the apartment is not clean and other stuff, but they do it because they care and they want you to learn how to be responsible.

Becoming Independent

Now that I'm in a new apartment, my life has changed a lot. I have to do my own food shopping and cook my own food—which doesn't bother me because I like to cook. I also cannot leave the apartment dirty or messy since my agency likes to do surprise visits. I don't know what the consequences are if they come over and see that the place is messy.

Sometimes I get upset at my agency for giving me too much to do, but I'm still glad I got accepted. I know that if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be prepared to try to live on my own.