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More help planned for foster grads

Agency would
tutor teenagers
on how to live
on their own

BY BILL HIRSCHMAN
STAFF WRITER

Andrew Christian's first five months of independence were tough. The 19-year-old former foster child had to leave his Coconut Creek group home once he graduated from high school, quickly receiving a crash course in survival.

"I needed to figure out where to live, how to find a job, transportation. I needed tutoring in

"We need a one-stop shop. The training right now is all over the place."

ROBIN CRAIG
OF THE JUNIOR LEAGUE OF GREATER FORT LAUDERDALE

math and reading. There were days I was short on money; food wasn't coming in," he said.

Social service activists in Broward County know more services are needed to help hun-

dreds of young adults who no longer qualify for state-funded support after they turn 18.

One plan already is under way. The Junior League of Greater Fort Lauderdale, United

Way of Broward County and ChildNet, the agency supervising foster children, want to enlarge and centralize the few existing programs.

The keystone would be a single location offering services encompassing classes in life skills such as budgeting and parenting, counseling, tutoring — even a living room where clients can hang out and talk about life's challenges and successes.

The multimillion-dollar agency, expected to be launched in the next three to five years, doesn't have a name yet or a location.

The center would duplicate a program that has gathered job trainers, social workers and mentors in Contra Costa County, Calif., since 2001 to serve former foster children in "a home

■ FOSTER CONTINUES ON 8B

Need expands; services might

■ FOSTER

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away from home.”

“We need a one-stop shop. The training right now is all over the place,” said Robin Craig of the Junior League.

She had trouble locating programs herself. “Imagine how 18-year-olds are trying to find it.”

Without such support, former foster children are more likely than their peers to receive food stamps, less likely to continue their education, likely to earn less, and more likely to end up in the criminal justice system, according to the state Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability’s study last December.

Children from traditional families sometimes have difficulty adjusting to adult responsibilities. Former foster children have a tougher time because of additional social and emotional baggage, said Elizabeth Wynter, United Way coordinator of transitional programs for foster children.

“Because of the trauma they have been through, they have a lack of an attachment to positive adult role models in their lives,” Wynter said. “Who do you go to when you have questions, when you need support?”

A few programs are scattered across Broward and in Palm Beach County, where a different Junior League chapter has championed the Kids@Home program to provide support for young adults who

were foster children. The Broward sponsors started a fund-raising campaign last week among companies and people who donated to their previous social projects. An anonymous donor contributed \$100,000 on Thursday.

They try to pair clients with mentors, find low-cost housing, teach homemaking skills, help them find work, even provide volunteers to drive them to medical and social services appointments.

But the Broward programs cannot keep up with the demand. About 110 foster children in Broward turn 18 this year. They join about 500 others between the ages of 18 and 23.

Help is essential because foster children have no idea what awaits them, Christian said. He cobbled enough advice and financial aid from a few programs he found. He also began studying electrical engineering at Broward Community College.

When he visits his younger brother still living in the group home, “I hear all those kids talking about what they’re going to do. They’re talking how the first thing they’re going to do is buy a car,” said Christian, who negotiates three bus routes to attend classes.

“They think it’s going to be peaches and cream, and I’m talking, ‘You don’t know.’”

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