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## Agency aims to build home for former foster kids

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John Harrison was living in Fort Lauderdale in a group home for foster kids when he turned 18.

He was in the middle of his senior year, but instead of staying in school to earn a diploma, he was given a one-way bus ticket to the Children's Home Society in Fort Pierce the day he became a legal adult.

No longer in the care of the state, Harrison was sent back to where he started.

The bus dropped him off on the society's doorstep with a garbage bag filled with everything he owned. It was about 5 p.m. on a Friday, and luckily, CHS Executive Director Lawrence Brooks was there. He checked Harrison into a hotel and gave him Cracker Barrel gift certificates so he could eat.

That was a year ago. Now 19, Harrison is working on his diploma at St. James Academy in Fort Pierce and living with a roommate in Port St. Lucie. He's enrolled in the CHS transitional living program, which provides life-skill lessons, housing assistance, counseling and access to medical care, among other services, until young adults turn 23.

But the odds are stacked against young adults like Harrison. Half of the kids who exit foster care at 18 don't earn a diploma.

"They messed me up," Harrison said. "I was going to graduate."

About 55 young adults "age out" of foster care each year in St. Lucie, Martin, Indian River and Okeechobee counties. Once they reach 18, the state relinquishes responsibility for them.

And although they are young, many of them have complicated pasts involving run-ins with the law, drug use and pregnancy.

Children's Home Society, however, is trying to turn around the lives of these young adults through a new volunteer program that provides them with life coaches, or mentors. The nonprofit also is launching a campaign to raise \$5 million to build a group home in the Treasure Coast for kids who have aged out of the system.

CHS of Florida, a nonprofit agency that provides a wide range of services for children, wants to build on 2 acres it owns in Indian River County. The home would have three two-bedroom units for young mothers and six one-bedroom units for other young adults. The young adults would stay in the home for 18 months.

The goal is to make the transition to independence smoother so that young adults can avoid homelessness and other problems. So far, the agency has raised \$2 million for the project.

Harrison, who lived in a homeless shelter for six months since he was released from state care, likes the idea.

"That would have been nice," he said, imagining how such a home would have changed his life after foster care.

The home will have a live-in case manager who helps the young adults get jobs, enroll in school and earn a high school diploma.

The case manager would help them deal with problems and teach them the lessons of day-to-day life, much like case manager Katie Kries does with the 20 young adults she works with in the transitional living program.

"She's helped me with going to school and with 'Do I wash this shirt with this shirt?' " said Jonathan Straz, 21, Harrison's roommate. "She's like a second mother to me."

Life often does not go well for children who age out of the state system, statistics show. According to the Children's Home Society, 62 percent are unemployed, 60 percent become parents within four years of turning 18, 33 percent are homeless within three years, and 50 percent never earn a high school diploma.

Christina Bury, 21, has had her struggles, and is somber when she talks about her parents not being there for her when she was a child and the times she's gotten into trouble. She hasn't gotten pregnant, though, and she's back in school at Indian River Community College.

When she talks about school and her goal of becoming a social worker to help struggling youth, she smiles. Kries has helped her with that goal. She picks her up to take her to school.

But Brooks is quick to note that the kids are accountable. They have to work to stay in school or keep their job. To get financial assistance for school, they have to be enrolled

full-time and maintain a 2.0 GPA. They also are required to be enrolled part-time during the summer or have a full-time job.

"This is not a free hand-out," Brooks said. "As soon as you stop working, we're not going to carry you."

Bury understands that now. She left school once and learned how difficult it is to go back. If she makes anything lower than a C, she said she will lose her financial aid for good.

So far, she has A's.

"It took a lot for me to get back to school," she said.

When Bury thinks about CHS' plans for the transitional living center, it makes her wistful. Turning 18 in the foster care system isn't easy, she said.

"When you put people in their own apartments when they're 18, it's a lot of responsibility. The bills ... they don't stop," she said.