

OUR VIEW Editorial: Foster kids need place to thrive, survive when they turn 18

Children's Home Society's goal is to build youth transition center for 18- to 23-year-olds

Thursday, March 27, 2008

GETTING INVOLVED

To donate to the Children's Home Society's fund-raising campaign for the youth transition center — or to volunteer as a mentor in the program — call (772) 489-5601 or e-mail Lawrence Brooks, executive director of CHS' Treasure Coast Division, at lawrence.brooks@chsfl.org.

THE VISION

Learn more in a fund-raising video (see related links) about the Children's Home Society's plan to build a youth transition center in Vero Beach for young adults (18 to 23) aging out of the state's foster care system.

BY THE NUMBERS

Men and women 18 or older leaving the foster-care system face many challenges:

- 17 percent of females become victims of violent acts such as rape or robbery.
- 33 percent become homeless within three years.
- 37 percent have no high school degree.
- 56 percent are unemployed.
- 60 percent become parents within four years.

Child Welfare League of America, Children's Home Society

A teenager's 18th birthday should be a cause for celebration.

For thousands of young people in Florida's foster-care system, this arbitrary line marking the transition to adulthood is an overwhelming source of fear, dread and uncertainty.

The support network they've relied upon for years evaporates overnight. One day they're learning life skills and receiving counseling, medical care, housing, and emotional and financial support through state-funded foster-care programs and foster families.

The next day — when they turn 18 — these same teen-agers are thrust into the world with virtually no support or resources to help them succeed.

About 800 of Florida's foster children become too old each year to continue in the system. As a result, many of these teens turn to criminal behavior and substance abuse, and struggle to find employment. Within three years of getting too old for foster care, a third of these youth become homeless.

There is a gaping omission in Florida's foster care system.

Bridging the 18- to 23-year-old gap is one of the missions of the Children's Home Society of Florida.

CHS' Treasure Coast Division, which serves teens in Martin, St. Lucie, Indian River and Okeechobee counties, has undertaken an important project: to build a transition youth center in Vero Beach for foster-care children who are forced to leave the system at age 18.

The facility will house 20 teen-agers and require a comprehensive array of services — education, transportation, job training and mentoring — designed to prepare these young adults live on their own.

CHS has raised more than \$2 million for the \$5 million project. In addition to private donations, the organization is seeking a \$750,000, one-time appropriation from the Legislature, which would match another state grant. It also is recruiting volunteers interested in mentoring young people in the program.

Transitioning to adulthood is difficult — even under the most ideal circumstances.

Now imagine facing these challenges without the financial and emotional support of a family. Layer on years of instability — moving from one home to the next — physical, emotional or sexual abuse, an absence of healthy role models and a sense of abandonment, and you can begin to grasp the fear and uncertainty confronting the state's foster children approaching their 18th birthday.

Kind-hearted, generous residents of the Treasure Coast should help make this dream a reality.