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## Program aims to help foster-care teenagers as they turn 18

**A nonprofit group unfurls an ambitious plan to ease the teens' transition to adulthood.**

By Kate Santich  
Sentinel Staff Writer  
November 13, 2007

Imagine you've just turned 18 and you have no home, no drivers license, no job, no idea what you want to do with yourself and no family to lean on. If you're lucky, you at least have a high-school diploma.

That's the reality for many of the 150 teenagers in Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties who each year grow out of the age range for foster care with no safety net.

"Those 150 foster youth can be a great resource for the community -- or they can be a great drain," said Gerard Glynn, president of the board of City of Life Foundation.

The local nonprofit organization released an ambitious plan Monday to ease foster teens' transition to adulthood.

"We'd prefer to rally behind our next generation rather than turn our backs on them," he said.

In many ways, Glynn said, the plan would simply give foster kids the same opportunities most teens have -- a chance to work a summer job, get a library card, get help with schoolwork and learn to manage a bank account, rent an apartment, and make their own medical and dental appointments.

Further, foster teens should have a chance to stay in the same school instead of moving every few months.

They should learn to use the Internet -- with adult supervision. They should have the chance to go to church or participate in extracurricular activities. And they should all learn how to drive.

"I know a lot of young people struggle those first few years away from home, but unlike foster youth, they have a family to support them," said 23-year-old Jeseña Brown, a former foster child who spoke at a news conference announcing the plan.

"I lacked so many basic life skills. . . . I had no support network. I spent two weeks with \$20 to my name and absolutely no food."

Her turning point came when the wife of her former foster home's director helped her get a job and education at Rollins College, where she earned a degree in anthropology while working and raising her little sister.

Today she has a job with the university's Philanthropy & Nonprofit Leadership Center. She's also a wife and new mother -- and her little sister is earning her degree in environmental studies at Rollins.

## **Martinez lends support**

U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez of Orlando, a former foster child, also spoke to lend his support to the plan.

Though his circumstances were different -- he had loving parents, but they were still in Cuba -- Martinez recalled the anxiety he felt at 18, when he realized he was on his own.

"Most of all I lacked that support of knowing I had family to fall back on," he said.

Although there have been piecemeal attempts at some of the ideas proposed, the City of Life's plan calls for community-wide cooperation on a wide-ranging agenda that would be monitored by the foundation.

Many of the ideas, Glynn said, could be implemented without any additional funding, and all the goals could be reached within five years.

Charities that already offer mentoring to younger kids, for instance, could be called upon to help 16- to 23-year-olds -- an age group that is typically ignored by such programs.

And financial counselors who now aid adults with credit woes could be tapped to teach foster teens how to open bank accounts and manage their income.

## **Some ideas bear costs**

But some of the ideas would cost money -- such as giving every foster teen a free bus pass. And a network of apartment owners would have to be persuaded to rent to former foster kids with no credit history and no adult to co-sign.

"We, the people in the state of Florida, have become their de facto parents," Glynn said. "And we need to treat these young adults as we would our own biological children in helping them succeed."

*Kate Santich can be reached at [ksantich@orlandosentinel.com](mailto:ksantich@orlandosentinel.com)*

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