

These kids are aged out, but not grown up

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Good luck.

There was a time when young adults got little more than a farewell when they aged out of the state's foster care system.

Aged out? It's the term social workers use for the foster children who are forced to leave the state's care when they turn 18. At that age, they are legal adults, old enough to fight for their country and fend for themselves.

Yeah, right.

These young men and women typically have endured all types of abuse and neglect. After all, there are reasons they ended up in the state's care in the first place. Some have parents who are incarcerated. Some have parents who have lost their battle with drug addiction. Some have never known their parents.

Even under the state's care, many of the kids have bounced to different foster homes, switched schools countless times and struggled to find some sense of normalcy.

Normalcy, by the way, is not having to subject a friend's parents to a security check so you can attend an innocent sleepover party, a reality for foster kids.

Then at 18, they're out, no longer allowed to live with foster families or stay in group homes. Although they have little or no support from their biological families, they must find housing, transportation, jobs and medical care while continuing educational pursuits.

It's not when they graduate, it's when they turn 18, regardless of where they are in school.

Think about when you were a high school junior or senior, fretting about how to pay for a new pair of jeans, who to ask to the dance and whether to eat at Wendy's or McDonald's. Now add all of life's responsibilities to the mix and imagine how you would have fared.

Diane Zambito is all too familiar with the young adults who address these difficulties every day. Zambito is director of Connected By 25, a countywide program aimed at helping these kids make the successful transition to adulthood.

"As parents, we try to provide our kids with an infrastructure to grow," Zambito said. "That's all our responsibility for the kids who have been in the system."

In a neatly remodeled white home with purple trim on East Palm Avenue in Tampa Heights, Zambito heads up a resource center for kids who have aged out or are likely to age out.

Connected By 25 serves the county's 402 youth ages 13 to 17 in the foster care system and 116 young adults ages 18 to 23. It's a large number but manageable.

Connected By 25 provides a variety of services from workforce development to financial literacy, which covers everything from balancing a checkbook to saving money. An educational advocate tracks the foster youths as they move from high school to high school.

However, most of the children need even more basic life skills. Those who have lived in group homes are used to having their food served to them and have no concept of how to prepare a meal.

Consider the day Zambito told two hungry kids to boil some hot dogs in the resource center's kitchen. She walked in to find a smokey kitchen because the teens had boiled the hot dogs without removing them from the package.

The Eckerd Family Foundation and Hillsborough Kids Inc. are the leading contributors to the \$1.3-million program and, after launching the effort last December, they're ready to solicit your help.

The foundation will gather more than 150 business and community leaders at 10 a.m. Oct. 28 at the Hyatt Tampa Regency for brunch to learn more about Connected By 25. The goal is to enlist businesses and individuals to become "door openers," people willing to open doors via mentoring, job training or donations.

"One thing you learn about these kids is that they're very resilient," said Joseph Clark, president of the Eckerd Family Foundation. "What that says is if you just give them a chance, it's like (giving them) gold."

Every time I think of these kids, I keep going back to how the rest of us depend so much on our parents. There are college grads still living in their mom's basement. There are grown folks still asking pops for a little cash to pay the phone bill.

My dad died in 2001, my mom died in 2002, and I'm still leaning on them.

Surely we can do something for the kids who have no one to lean on.

That's all I'm saying.

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