

## Group helps teens' transitions

**Connected by 25 provides mentors to help "aged-out" foster kids adjust to independent living. It needs more volunteers.**

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TAMPA - When Krystal Harper moved into her first apartment, she lived without electricity for a week. No one explained a crucial little detail: You need to pay a deposit before getting the lights turned on.

Thousands of young people like Harper, who grow up in the foster care system, and then leave it, discover that adulthood can be scary and confusing. On their own for the first time, they have no one to ask: How do I keep bills paid? How do I get car insurance? How I can I find a place to live?

Harper, 21, appeared at a community brunch Friday and said what she had needed more than anything else was simply a mentor who could have given her advice and "constant support."

And that, said Diane M. Zambito, is the reason Hillsborough County needs more adults to pitch in and help young people like Harper, who are crossing the divide between foster care and independence.

"I think the message is to open a door" for the youths, said Zambito. She is executive director of Connected by 25, which works with more than 100 youths over 18 who have "aged out" of the foster care system, and about 400 other teenagers who still are in the system.

Gov. Jeb Bush also appeared at the brunch, saying he was glad to be wearing a suit and outside of hurricane zones, and urged local people to help Tampa youths like Harper.

"Government can't hug a child, government can't tell a child "You've done something wrong, here's a better path,"" Bush said. But regular folks can, he said. Bush pledged to help youths like Harper himself, especially, he said, because he will soon be out of office and still in Florida.

"Count on me as someone who might open a door for you," Bush said, and gave them his e-mail address: [jeb@jeb.org](mailto:jeb@jeb.org)

Connected by 25 has a two-story house in downtown Tampa where workers and youths themselves help young people make the transition. The group works to help them do well in high school and beyond; obtain job training; learn basic financial skills such as balancing a checkbook; begin personal savings plans; and learn about forming businesses.

Organizers urged people to call Connected by 25 at 813 314-2070 or visit the Web site [www.cby25.org](http://www.cby25.org) to learn how to help. The group wants to find mentors for youths, businesses that will offer jobs and job training, and people who will contribute to scholarships and other programs.

The Eckerd Family Foundation announced Friday it would spend \$1.3-million on the effort over the next three years. Foundation president Joe Clark said it offered an excellent opportunity to help teenagers become successful adults. The program also gets support from other groups, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and works in cooperation with Hillsborough Kids Inc., the state-funded agency that runs foster care programs under contract with the state Department of Children and Families. Zambito said she would like the program to extend to Pinellas County and around the state.

Ashley Kyle, 19, said children in foster care need to find mentors by some way other than sheer luck, which was how she found one. She said she was so upset at school one day that Marecia Devine, the mother of a friend, stepped in to offer her comfort.

Now she has someone to visit on holidays and to confer with about hurricane planning. Devine also helped encourage her to graduate from high school on time, even though she shuttled between schools during foster care, and lost credits.

"That's my mother figure," Kyle said.

Now Kyle, like Harper, is a student at Hillsborough Community College.

Russell Aliff, who is 17 and on the verge of aging out of the foster care system, said the most difficult part of the foster care lifestyle was "being different than everyone else" and not doing things other kids did with their families, such as going to football games together.

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