

Program puts teens on track
By A TIMES EDITORIAL
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Most teenagers look forward to their 18th birthday, when they will be considered, at least technically, adults. It's not necessarily a happy day for boys and girls living in foster homes, however. On that day they "age out" of state care even though about half are still in high school. Poorly prepared for independence (what 18-year-old is?), too many of them drop out of school, fail to find a job and ultimately end up homeless.

A program to break that cycle, called Connected By 25, was started in Hillsborough County a couple of years ago and is so successful it will be expanding to Pinellas County. The concept is this: Teenagers in foster care need preparation and stability to become independent, contributing members of society. Since they have no parental involvement, they need others in the community to step up with guidance, encouragement and financial support through early adulthood.

The idea grew out of a national study of foster care and was brought to Florida by the Eckerd Family Foundation in Clearwater. It set up a pilot program in Hillsborough County, which has been an impressive success. Nearly 300 former foster children have gotten educational advice and support so they would stay in school and go on to job training or college. More than 100 of those young people have opened bank accounts, matched by community partners and used for housing, education, health care or transportation.

Importantly, the volunteer organization that oversees the program seeks advice from the foster children themselves. "That's a key piece of the Connected By 25 program," said Jane Soltis, Eckerd's program director.

For example, program organizers knew that foster children switch schools frequently because they are moved from home to home. What could be done to bring continuity to such scattered lives? It was foster children who came up with the solution: a dedicated guidance counselor assigned to those students no matter which school they attend.

The effort to replicate such success in Pinellas is being headed by the county's Juvenile Welfare Board and the Community Foundation of Tampa Bay, which helps direct individual philanthropy. The first task is to identify foster children between the ages of 13 and 17 years old and to determine what resources are needed to prepare them for independence. About 100 Pinellas foster children age out of state care each year.

The Connected By 25 program is remarkably efficient, said Diane Zambito, executive director. For the most part it uses resources that already exist in the community, although in Hillsborough the program has set up an alternative school and is seeking state funding for supervised housing. "When investing in Connected By 25, you know we're using your dollars in a very effective way, " Zambito said.

To work in Pinellas or any other county, the program needs broad community support. It's hard to imagine a more deserving population - children dealt a bad hand early in life and who are just asking for a chance. When the organizers of Connected By 25 come calling, please do what you can.

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