

## **The Tampa Tribune**

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### **Businesses Step Up for Foster Kids**

It's got to be one of the saddest moments in a foster kid's life - the day he or she turns 18 and is sent packing. What is a teenager supposed to do at an age when peers continue to depend on mom and dad for housing, food, transportation and guidance?

Last week the Eckerd Family Foundation took a crucial step toward answering that question. It rallied local businesses to join an effort called "Connected by 25" that provides financial and social support for foster children about to leave the system.

The private sector is stepping up - there's a similar effort in South Florida - because of a Florida auditor general's report that raises questions about the Department of Children & Families management of a program to help foster kids become independent.

Aging foster kids don't have time to wait for DCF to get its act together.

Many foster children aren't prepared for independence when they reach 18. Often they haven't even graduated high school when they are shown the door.

State law should be changed to allow foster kids enrolled in high school at their 18th birthday to stay in their foster homes as long as they are moving toward graduation.

In the meantime, Connected by 25 has a plan to open doors for former foster children. The effort encourages businesses to step forward with part-time jobs, mentors and contributions to help pay for college or job training.

It's not an insurmountable task. In Hillsborough County, only about 75 kids age out of foster care each year, although 450 more teenagers are coming up behind them.

Eckerd Family Foundation President Joseph Clark said the goal is to help foster children until they turn 25, which is about the same age that most middle-class kids with generous parents become financially independent. Former foster children are more resilient than most youngsters, but they lack the kind of life-skills training that others take for granted.

An 18th birthday should be a hopeful time for all young adults, not just those who have permanent families. Connected by 25 is a commendable effort that will show children given short shrift in life that their communities aren't ready to write them off.

**This story can be found at: <http://www.tampatrib.com/News/MGBN1HIVIFE.html>**