

Fostering change

Young people in foster care want reforms

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For youth from any background, the transition to adult life can involve many demanding tasks.

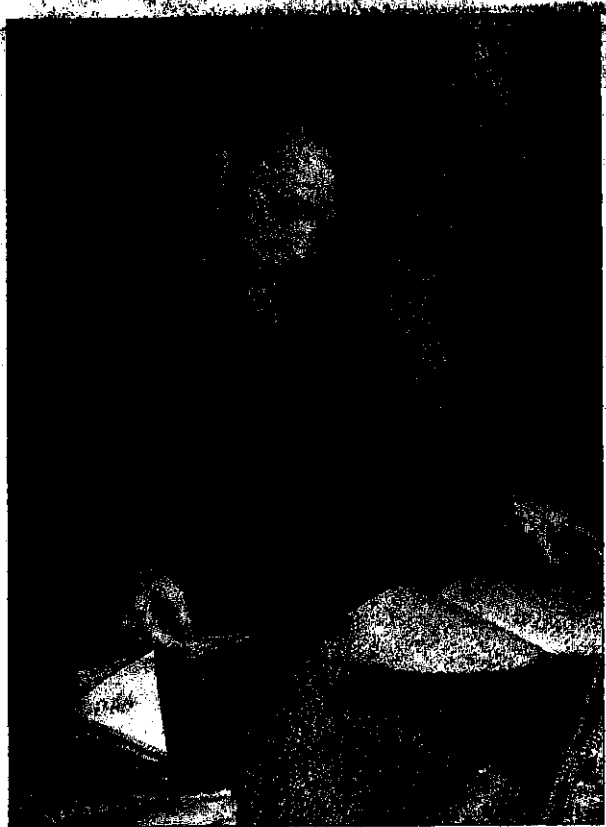
Finding a job, financing a college education and lining up housing are just a few examples. And for youth in foster care — who often find themselves on their own just as they turn 18 — few adults may be available to guide them.

Using grants obtained from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Michigan Department of Human Services is developing programs to help foster youth move toward life on their own.

Human services officials pursued the Casey initiative in response to some adverse circumstances which often impact the youth "aging out" of foster care.

"The idea is to prepare them a little bit more for be-

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RYAN BENTLEY/NEWS-REVIEW

Petoskey High School senior Ashley Miller, who's in foster care, organizes fabric swatches while working a part-time job at Contract Interiors of Harbor Springs.

FOSTER: Grant initiative helps foster youth, officials, address needs

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ing on their own than just (saying) 'You're 18, see ya,'" said Norvilla Bennett, a Traverse City-based local coordinator for the Casey initiative. "This is a population that is flying under the radar and creating statistics of homelessness and lack of sustainability."

Nationally, the Casey organization has observed that less than 50 percent of foster youth have graduated from high-school four years after leaving the care system. For the entire U.S. population ages 18-24, the high-school completion rate is 85 percent.

Casey also noted that 25 percent of youth have experienced a period of homelessness within four years of departing foster care, and that 65 percent have not been able to maintain employment for a year.

The "Opportunity Passport," which involves bank accounts to help youth save for their future needs, is the key component of the program. Michigan's Casey initiative provides a bit of seed money as well as dollar-for-dollar matches on long-term savings — up to \$1,000 yearly — for foster youth ages 14 and up. Adults 23 and younger who have previously spent time with foster families are eligible as well.

For shorter-term, personal needs, youth in the program are provided with separate savings accounts.

"What we're teaching them is long-term savings habits," said Shannon Brower, a Department of Human Services consultant and Good Hart resident. "It takes income to get by, but it takes assets to get ahead."

About 40 foster youth around Emmet, Charlevoix and Antirrim counties have Opportunity Passport accounts.

The benefactor

THE JIM CASEY Youth Opportunities Initiative, based in St. Louis, is funded by two foundations, Casey Family Programs and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. These endowments were established by United Parcel Service founder Jim Casey and members of his family. The Michigan Department of Human Services is one of 12 organizations around the United States — and the only state agency — cooperating with the Casey initiative to provide transitional services to foster youth.

The state's transition program also lets foster-care enrollees get involved with a network of youth boards. These are designed to offer a channel for advocacy on foster-care issues and to help youth form supportive relationships with peers. Youth are paid stipends for their service in some of these activities.

Petoskey High School senior Ashley Miller — who's spent about a year and half in foster care — has found the Casey initiative helpful in more ways than one.

Ashley, who has plans to enroll at Central Michigan University this fall, said the program exposed her to scholarships and other financial-aid possibilities. With two part-time jobs, she's trying to save money for a car purchase — and appreciates the matching funds available for her individual development account.

"It helps a lot," she said. "I've become more responsible with money."

Ashley said the foster care system generally has served her well. She maintains contact with her birth parents and an older sister, and her current fos-

ter family seems willing to help her out even after high school.

Still, Ashley believes it's important to advocate for better opportunities for foster youth in general. She serves on a statewide panel focusing on educational opportunities, and has had the opportunity to speak with legislators in Lansing about foster-care issues.

"Just being able to present some of our problems to the legislators has been a big step, making them aware of us," she said.

Through the Casey initiative, Ashley also had the chance to visit Baltimore for a national conference in which youth discussed foster care trends in their home states.

In Northern Michigan, youth boards exist in Petoskey, Traverse City and Cadillac. About 30 youth participate in these panels.

Michigan's Casey program also works to line up sources of support for foster youth in the community. Businesses, for example, sometimes give priority hiring consideration to the youth or offer them special promotions. Several colleges have streamlined their enrollment

process for Casey participants.

"We see lots of room for businesses to be involved," Bennett said.

Michigan is now in the third — and final — year of a Casey grant which provides \$800,000 annually. The program currently serves youth in a 10-county area of Northern Michigan, along with seven more counties downstate.

Once this grant expires, Casey has agreed to provide a lesser degree of financial support to the state for three more years. By 2009, DHS hopes to have other funding sources lined up and extend the program statewide.

"We have been extremely pleased with the progress of our Michigan site," Casey spokeswoman Carla Owens said. "They have not only helped to build assets for youth transitioning from care, but they have also helped to transform the child welfare system by making legislative recommendations and policy changes to DHS, the legislature, the court system and the governor."

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