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Foster kids face tough odds when they reach adulthood

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By John Bozzo

For Hometown News

DAYTONA BEACH - Tyiesha Everett did not have to dread her 18th birthday like many foster children do. Even though she has "aged out" of the system, she still has a place to live, will go to college and has a bright future.

"Most of the people living in foster care aren't as fortunate as I am," said Ms. Everett, who graduated on May 28 from Mainland High School. "I could have moved out because I was 18, but I like my family. I've been here half my life."

Now that she has graduated and aged out of the foster care system, Ms. Everett faces the

challenge of becoming self-sufficient. Her plans include studying sociology, first at Santa Fe College and then at the University of Florida.

A state Road to Independence program will pay for her college tuition and provide a \$1,256 monthly stipend to help with college expenses.

As she moves on, her foster family will continue to provide support. Everett plans to return to that foster home during college holidays.

"I'll be going to college from here," she said.

Ms. Everett has a solid foundation to move ahead with continued support from her foster family. For the other nearly 30,000 youngsters in this country who age out of the foster care system every year, the challenges are more difficult.

Six of every 10 men who age out of foster care commit a crime, according to national studies. Three of four women become pregnant and need public assistance.

Foster care children often have tragic life experiences that leave them more vulnerable to a poor outcome as they attempt to become a self-sufficient adult. Roughly half of children aged out of foster care reunite with their families. Some live with other relatives, are adopted or have a guardian. But others lose the mentoring of an adult caregiver.

"That's where the problem is," said Jo Lynn Deal, spokeswoman for the Community Partnership for Children.

The partnership oversees child protection for Volusia, Flagler and Putnam counties. Roughly 50 children age out of foster care every year in the three-county area.

"They have got to have a lot of independence and self-discipline to manage their lives," Deal said. "The resources available in a traditional family are just not available to them."

Community Partnership for Children does not maintain data on crime or pregnancies in former foster children. But education statistics show an improvement. In 2010-2011, 93 percent were in school, or received a high school diploma or GED, compared to 70 percent in 2008-09.

The partnership offers classes to teach foster children the skills they need to succeed, such as how to organize a checking account and handle credit.

But the programs have suffered from budget cuts, as have so many state programs. Ms. Deal said the Community Partnership for Children is doing its best to cope with a \$1.3-million funding shortfall by economizing, fund-raising and sometimes receiving help from corporate sponsors.

"One reason why children struggle is education before they came into care," Ms. Deal

said. "If they've had a tough situation, their education might have suffered."

Ms. Everett said her grades were always good, but she took school more seriously after moving in with her foster family.

"I didn't really think about anything seriously before I came here," Everett said in the dining area of her foster home.

When Ms. Everett was young, her mother was arrested for selling drugs. Ms. Everett was sent to a group home while her two sisters and brother were sent to another. At age 9, she went to a foster home with someone she knew, a woman who knew her birth mother, someone she already considered an "aunt."

"I was happy to go to people I knew and get out of the group home," Ms. Everett said. "It was great to be in a family setting."

Gwen Tongkam, Ms. Everett's foster mother, simply introduces herself as "Tyiesha's mother."

"State support stopped when Tyiesha was 18, but life didn't change for her because we were still here for her," Ms. Tongkam said.

Ms. Everett was a perfect fit in the foster family, a daughter for Ms. Tongkam and her husband, a sister for their two other children.

"She's been great," Ms. Tongkam said. "Tyiesha has not been a problem from day one. Her academics are outstanding. She does her chores. We appreciate her. She's been a real asset to our family."

Tongkam is confident of a good future for Ms. Everett, despite the odds against youths who age out of foster care.

"Tyiesha is going to be a nice, productive young lady," she said.

And, Ms. Tongkam adds, her family will still "be here" for as long as she needs.