

Eckerd Family Foundation

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Eckerd Family Foundation launches new program to help vulnerable young adults who “age out” of foster care

Gov. Jeb Bush says local program could serve as a model for Florida

TAMPA (October 28, 2005) – Placed in foster care at age 2, Lisa bounced around to 10 different foster homes and even more schools. When she turned 18, she had to leave the child welfare system and live on her own. Suddenly, she found herself “lost in the big world,” even homeless at one point.

“At age 18, I had no knowledge of how to enroll into college, how to apply for financial aid, how to shop wisely for a car, or how to open a bank account,” says Lisa. “I have learned through my own experiences, and I have paid the consequences.”

A new, privately-funded program called Connected by 25 of Hillsborough County will help young people, like Lisa, who “age out” of foster care become successful adults. Gov. Jeb Bush today called on some 150 community and business leaders from Greater Tampa Bay to provide jobs, education, housing, transportation and other opportunities to help these teenagers.

At a brunch with Bush and community leaders at the Hyatt Regency Tampa, Eckerd Family Foundation president Joe Clark announced that the foundation will contribute \$1.3 million over three years to Connected by 25, which Bush called a model of community involvement. “All of us remember someone who opened a door for us,” Gov. Bush said. “These young people need the assistance of the communities around them to successfully transition into their adult lives. When businesses and individuals open doors for these Floridians, we’ll all share in their successes.”

Connected by 25 is designed to help young people who must leave the child-welfare system when they turn 18. Many are still in high school but are expected to fend for themselves without resources and support. A recent University of Chicago study shows that they face formidable challenges and often struggle to stay in school, find stable housing, support themselves financially and secure medical services. They are three times more likely than their peers to be adrift from school and work. In Florida, some 800 teenagers “age out” of foster care annually. In Hillsborough County, 402 youth between 13 and 17 years old are in foster care; an additional 116 youth between the ages of 18 and 23 are being served.

Clark said that Connected by 25 aims to get foster youth on sound footing by linking them to banks, education, housing, jobs, and other support systems by age 25. The program encourages businesses, individuals, and public and private agencies to participate as Door Openers by providing jobs, internships and financial education, serving as mentors, contributing to a scholarship program, and offering matching funds for special savings accounts.

“We are pleased that so many community leaders are interested in joining us to help these young people,” Clark said. “Unfortunately, there are too few opportunities to help these teenagers become successful adults. We as a community need to invest in our young people leaving foster care. The payoff will benefit the entire community.”

Connected by 25 of Hillsborough County is supported by the Eckerd Family Foundation, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Lumina Foundation for Education and Casey Family Programs. In Hillsborough County, Connected by 25 is located at 401 E. Palm Ave., in Tampa. **To help Connected by 25, call 813-314-2070 or go to its website, www.cby25.org.**

“For foster youth, there is no extended family support when they turn 18, and yet, there is an unrealistic expectation for them to be self-sufficient,” says Diane Zambito, director of Connected by 25. “We need Door Openers who will provide this extended support.”

Many foster youth don’t have adults in their lives who could co-sign apartment leases or bank loans, teach them about money management or help them rebound from an unforeseen event or bad decision. For many, finding housing or transportation also poses big challenges.

Connected by 25 focuses on economic success because the ability to support oneself and accumulate assets often predicts future success in life. This major local initiative involves many local partners, including Hillsborough Kids, Inc. (HKI), Camelot Community Care, Inc., and the University of Tampa, among others. Connected by 25 uses five major strategies to help youth achieve economic success:

- Advocate and support academic achievement
- Facilitate and create access to workforce development opportunities
- Provide financial literacy programs
- Encourage savings and asset-building through the Opportunity Passport™ program, consisting of a personal debit account so young people can pay for short-term expenses and a matched savings account, known as an Individual Development Account (IDA), so young people can pay for assets, such as tuition and housing deposits
- Create entrepreneurship opportunities

Door Openers also are part of the Opportunity Passport™ program, designed by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a national foundation based in St. Louis whose mission is to help youth in foster care make successful transitions to adulthood.

Connected by 25 of Hillsborough County also features a telephone and e-mail hotline manned by former foster youth who help younger foster youth navigate the child-welfare system. Cby25 also features an educational advocate who makes sure foster youth don’t fall through the school system’s cracks.

Connected by 25 is guided by a Youth Planning Board, and a Connected by 25 Community Partnership Planning Board, made up of community and business leaders who can create opportunities for youth transitioning from foster care.

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The Eckerd Family Foundation is committed to promoting meaningful and lasting change to transform the lives of vulnerable youth and their families. The foundation's mission provides leadership and support for innovative educational, preventative, therapeutic and rehabilitative programs for children, youth and their families.