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Fostering Smooth Transitions

Charities step up efforts to help young adults leaving foster care

By Elizabeth Greene

New York

At age 20, Antoine Platel is less than a year away from a change that will be dramatic even for someone who is used to upheavals. On his next birthday, he will no longer qualify for the government foster-care benefits -- food, housing, and supervision, for example -- that for years have stood in for the security that loving, stable parents are supposed to provide.

"It's a big step," Mr. Platel says, but he is getting support from several organizations with advice on how to live on a budget, write a résumé, figure out what career to pursue, and deal with many of the other challenges he will face. "I have put myself in a lot of programs," he says. "It makes me better and more of a person."

After deciding he wants to be a motion-picture animator, Mr. Platel enrolled in a 12-week seminar at the Youth Advocacy Center here to help him delineate concrete steps to reach his goal. By the end of the seminar, he is expected to arrange an informational interview with someone in animation who can describe the profession and also possibly offer Mr. Platel, a student at the Fashion Institute of Technology, some guidance.

The Youth Advocacy Center is just one of a growing number of charities, buoyed by new federal money and private funds, that are working with adolescents and young adults like Mr. Platel to help smooth the transition from foster care to independent living. Some 20,000 people leave foster care each year, generally between the ages of 18 and 21. (The age limits for when a person no longer qualifies for foster-care benefits varies from state to state.)

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 doubled the funds available, to \$140-million, for programs that help young people up to age 21 leave foster care successfully. In addition, President Bush -- whose father was the first president to proclaim May as National Foster Care Month -- has asked Congress for \$60-million to start a federal program that would defray the costs of higher education and vocational training for some foster-care youths.

And while foundation support for foster-care programs is slim, two new foundations have made the transition out of foster care a major focus -- the Andrus Family Fund, here in New York, which is part of the Surdna Foundation; and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, in St. Louis. Together, they have a grants budget of about \$6-million this year.

What's more, a corporate foundation -- the Freddie Mac Foundation, in McLean, Va., which gives out nearly \$22-million annually -- this year decided that helping young people leave foster care would be one of its grant-making priorities.

Years of Low Achievement

Many of the new efforts to help this population have been born out of frustration with years of low achievement levels by the people who, because of abuse or neglect by their parents, were turned over to the state for care. Studies show that after kids leave foster care, they are disproportionately likely to drop out of high school or skip college. They also are more likely than other young adults to become homeless, depressed, and unemployed, and to have problems with drugs and alcohol.

In the late 1990s, University of Wisconsin researchers, for example, interviewed 113 youths who had been discharged from foster care 12 to 18 months earlier. Nearly one-third of them were on government assistance. And more than one-third had been victims of physical violence, sexually assaulted, raped, incarcerated, or homeless at least once since leaving foster care.

"These are kids who all they've ever heard is, No, there's not enough -- there's no foster home for you, I'm sorry you can't stay in your own school, there's not enough money to send you to piano lessons," says Eileen McCaffrey, executive director of the Orphan Foundation of America, a Reston, Va., charity that gives youths who have been in foster care scholarships for postsecondary education and vocational training. Recipients are also provided with online mentors and care packages.

The interest in helping youths make the transition out of foster care arises, in part, from heightened sensitivity by charities to the full range of developmental issues -- from emotional to physical to educational -- confronting young adults.

Like nonprofit work to benefit youths in general, charity efforts in behalf of people leaving foster care are increasingly comprehensive, emphasizing permanent relationships with adults who can serve as mentors; decent housing; postsecondary education rather than just a high-school diploma or GED; careers over jobs; and safe havens for teenagers who need them, like gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youths who may have encountered abuse in foster placements.

"It's about working with young people in foster care in a way that you would work with your own children," says Maria Garin Jones, director of youth services for the Child Welfare League of America, in Washington.

The Andrus Family Fund's interest in foster care stems from its mission to help people successfully navigate the big transitions in their lives. Foundation officials say they identified people leaving foster care as one of their major concerns because such youths often have not received the encouragement and support they need to thrive later in life. "I think sometimes people don't ask what their dreams are," says Steve Kelban, executive director of the fund, which was created in 2000 by fifth-generation members of the Andrus family, whose patriarch, the businessman and politician John Emory Andrus, established the Surdna Foundation in 1917.

Andrus efforts include a gift of \$300,000 from the fund to Berkshire Farm Center and Services for Youth, in Canaan, N.Y., to expand its work. The center receives government support for a residential program to help 20 young men learn how to clean an apartment, prepare their own

meals, and manage money, among other basic life skills. A public school on the group's campus enables the teenagers to get their high-school diplomas and start thinking about college.

Those who do well in the independent-living program are eligible to take part in the center's Educational/Vocational Academy, an intensive preparation for postsecondary education. Michael C. Danenberg, director of independent-living services at Berkshire Farm, stresses that the program encourages kids to reach further than GED's and low-skilled jobs. "We help them realize what their goals are and help them achieve their goals," he says. "We are always pushing them to take the initiative."

The Andrus grant will help pay for internship and mentor programs for the center's residents, as well as new group-therapy sessions on race, self-image, and other issues.

'Opportunity Passport'

One of the most ambitious programs being proposed to aid youths making the transition out of foster care is run by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, in St. Louis. It is an \$18-million effort to create a card, or "opportunity passport," that would provide tools for independence.

The passport would be linked to a financial institution, and would probably take the form of a card for an ATM, with a magnetic strip. A debit account would be set up for each participant, into which a charity or other group could deposit money to cover short-term needs, like books for school. And the card would give users access to their own individual development accounts -- savings accounts for education expenses, the purchase of a home, or starting a business. The organization would put seed money into the development accounts and, possibly along with other groups, might match a portion of the money the youths put into them. It also might reward some types of work performed by the youths with additional deposits.

The passports could also be used to identify a youth as eligible for job training and job-placement help, or some other benefit provided by cooperating organizations.

If the effort is successful, says Gary Stangler, the foundation's executive director and the former head of Missouri's Department of Social Services, it could serve as a model for federal and state programs.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is a joint project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, in Baltimore, and Casey Family Programs, a Seattle operating foundation. The first round of grants, expected to be announced later this month, will be focused in Atlanta, Kansas City, Kan., Kansas City, Mo., St. Louis, and San Antonio.

"This is the niche that we think is one of the missing components" for foster youths, says Mr. Stangler. "There are all kinds of components that teach a skill and try to hook you up with a mentor. There is nothing that tries to tie it together with a financial piece, and a financial piece that builds assets that we hope contribute to a future orientation."

A complementary program -- an "ePassport" that stores computerized health and education data on a card -- is being tested by the Community College Foundation, a Sacramento group. It allows foster youths, who often live in numerous cities and states throughout their time in care, to keep track of all of their records, even after they leave foster care.

'They Need Advocates'

The Casey focus on foster care originated with Jim Casey, who helped found United Parcel Service. After talking to employees and others he met who had been through foster care, Mr. Casey became concerned about the impact of the child-welfare system on the people it aimed to help. Douglas W. Nelson, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's president, says grant makers should help encourage new charity efforts to bolster government-run foster programs. "The public systems that have been left holding this obligation for most kids in this country need allies, they need advocates, and they need partners," he says. "I would wish there was a bigger network of allies and advocates and partners."

While a number of foundations will make an occasional grant to foster-care efforts, only a handful have made the issue a top priority.

In 2000, according to the Foundation Center, a New York group that tracks grant making, foundations awarded \$6.3-million to help the 588,000 children and young adults in foster care. That was one-quarter of 1 percent of the money that foundations spent to help children and youths. The center's database represents about half of all grant dollars.

It may be hard for some foundations to muster support for foster-care programs, in part because the track record for progress has been so poor, says David Tobis, executive director of the Child Welfare Fund, which was set up at Hunter College of the City University of New York to advise an anonymous donor on \$1-million in grant making each year, largely in the field of foster care. "The child-welfare system has been very hard to reform," he says. "There have been improvements and then things deteriorate again, and people are more reluctant to put money into that kind of a system."

Even if foundations give more toward helping people who have lived in foster care in the future, government money is likely to remain the driving force behind most efforts.

Good Shepherd Services, in New York, for example, receives all but \$3-million of its \$27-million budget from government sources to pay for its foster care and adoption programs, including residences for foster youth.

Its newest program is a "foyer" project to provide transitional services to young adults who are leaving foster care or who otherwise are in need of a place to call home. Working with Common Ground Community, a New York charity that helps the formerly homeless, Good Shepherd Services hopes to open a new residence for 40 young men and women next year.

"Given the way society and young people are today, I think 24 is a much more appropriate age level" than the 21-year-old limit many state programs have on qualifying for foster-care services, says Sister Paulette LoMonaco, the group's executive director. "We see the foyer as one model, one opportunity, to give young people continued opportunities to get themselves together -- educationally, vocationally, and socially -- so that they can be independent, truly independent."

Sister Paulette says a program like the foyer project, which will cost around \$965,000 a year, is too expensive to be sustained by foundations. "My goal is not to have an enormous amount of private support in this because we would like to be a replicable model," she says.

Fundamental to Sister Paulette's work and many other charity efforts is the desire to move beyond housing and educational opportunities to instill people leaving foster care with the confidence to manage on their own.

At the Youth Advocacy Center, this has meant helping teenagers who have lived in foster care to map out personal plans for how to achieve their goals, practice doing job interviews, and meet professionals in their prospective careers who can provide advice.

Betsy Krebs, executive director of the Youth Advocacy Center, says she tells Mr. Platel and the others in her program that they can and must learn how to fend for themselves.

"No one else," she says, "is really going to do it for you."

Rayshawn Pettaway, a 16-year-old in the program who is living with his grandparents after years of shuttling among foster homes, says the center's support is helping him to think ahead.

Mr. Pettaway, who wants to become a lawyer, says he is especially encouraged by the center's offers to introduce him to someone in the profession who can talk about what the work entails. Without the center's help, "it would have been hard," he says. "I wouldn't know where to look."