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Program nurtures youths leaving foster care

BY JONA ISON • GAZETTE STAFF WRITER • AUGUST 29, 2010

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Dominique Smith has limited time to help.

She works with youth in the foster care system on gaining independent living skills through a Children's Services program. However, when they turn 21, she has to cut them loose -- if they even hung on for that additional three years of help.

Last week, one of Smith's former youths stopped her at a store and asked for help. She's without a job, struggling to get on her feet and turns 21 in September.

Usually, she'd only have a month to get help and nowhere to turn, but a pilot program, Ohio Youth in Transition, just started with plans to service at-risk adults ages 18 to 29.

"It's been a big need. When I work with kids, I think 'Oh, God, (when they turn 21) I can't help them anymore,'" Smith said.

The program began this spring in Columbus and now is starting in Ross County through the efforts of Trish and Alvin Mares. The couple live in Ross County and work in Columbus. Alvin is an associate professor in the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University, and Trish is a licensed social worker with Buckeye Ranch.

"At some point, all programs end, and they often end sometime between 18 and 22 ... Then they're often left on their own, and we'd like to take them at that point and help them through the rest of their 20s," Alvin said.

The Columbus program is partnering primarily with Community Action, while the Ross County pilot has all "four legs" that Alvin said creates the best environment for success -- Ross County Community Action, Ross County Job and Family Services, the Human Services Technology program at Ohio University-Chillicothe and Orchard Hill United Church of Christ. Each agency has someone volunteering with the program, and OU-C human services students will help with the program, gaining valuable hands-on experience that also is required to earn their degree. As such, the Mares describe it as a no-cost program.

Students will provide individual case management and work with Community Action to conduct monthly group meetings addressing life skills and support.

Orchard Hill will provide individual and group mentoring. Mentors will begin training -- learning about such things as setting boundaries and mental health -- during October sessions at Orchard Hill. While the church is supporting the mentoring portion of the program, anyone can become a mentor for the program. Having a faith-based partner is about connecting to people who would be willing to help, not in bringing people to Christianity, the Mares said.

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"Members of the faith-based community may be more ready, willing and able to make a long term commitment," Alvin said. "It's not an evangelical thing."

Having partners that are likely to commit long term is imperative to success. The pilot program is designed to run for four years as the partners develop and tweak it. As the four years come to an end, the program will be evaluated for its effectiveness and hopefully continue on, the Mares said.

"A three- to four-year period is a long enough period of time to see them make some real changes and get further in life," Alvin said.

The mentors will be a key part, providing a sense of nurturing that youth coming out of foster care or the Department of Youth Services often lack. Mentors will be expected to spend at least five hours each month with mentees, specifically checking in on periods of change -- such as a new job, home or child -- and celebrating successes and holidays.

"Whether they're coming out of foster care or incarceration, they lose that caring adult watching over them," Alvin said.

"Statistics have shown that a caring adult may be the single most important thing in success," Trish said.

Another focus will be helping mentees determine what they want to do in life and connecting them to the right training or education to accomplish that dream.

Anyone can refer or self-refer to the program. Mentees will be screened for eligibility, which means not only ensuring they are independent and meeting maximum income requirements but also ensuring they are not being served by another program.

The point of Ohio Youth in Transition is not to replace existing programs, Trish assured.

"Everybody's doing a great job. We're working to link them to the existing programs," she said.

As part of the pilot evaluation, Alvin will study and write about the program, using information from program participants who agree to be part of his formal study. If the program is successful, he and Trish hope to see it developed into other Ohio counties and potentially in other states.



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