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Apartments fill gap for teens who age out of foster care

By Georgia East, Sun Sentinel

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FORT LAUDERDALE

At this apartment complex painted cheerful shades of aqua and lavender, Judson Andre, 21, has been the man with the keys.

Here at H.O.M.E.S., a cluster of 15 apartments in northeast Fort Lauderdale, he handled maintenance issues — a leaky faucet, a stubborn air conditioner, a broken window — for \$10 an hour. He has his own apartment on site.

Looking at this responsible young adult, it's hard to imagine that when he was 16, Andre was homeless, orphaned and trying to care for two younger siblings.

"Before, I used to have to think if I were to lose my job, where would I go?" said Andre. "H.O.M.E.S. has been the only backup."

The home for former foster kids, ages 18 to 24, opened in May and quickly filled. Meant to be a bridge between growing up in state care and living independently, the apartments were transformed from low-income housing by a \$160,000 renovation grant from [Broward County](#) and the city of Fort Lauderdale. A nonprofit organization and private donations — no federal or state subsidies — keep it going, for about \$5,000 a month.

Short \$60,000 in its operations budget earlier this year, H.O.M.E.S. was on the verge of closing when the Jim Moran Foundation provided funds to keep the doors open.

"It's difficult to find employment or maintain a job when you don't have somewhere stable to live," said Katharine Barry, president and CEO of H.O.M.E.S. Inc., the nonprofit based on Northeast Sixth Avenue.

Including H.O.M.E.S., there are seven transitional independent living residences in [Broward County](#), with 150 spots, and every year, another 150 foster care teens turn 18 and age out of the system. Advocates say the numbers justify more such facilities, if only there was money for them.

These residences "connect young people to a community and provide them with some peer support," said Kristen Guerrise, executive director of the Flite Center, Fort Lauderdale Independence Training &



Education Center in Lauderhill.

Most of the 23 young adults living at H.O.M.E.S. struggled to find a place to settle after they left foster care. Now they see a path to independence at a fraction of market rentals. They pay \$400 a month.

The apartments are in strips of four or five connected by a U-shaped pathway. They have one or two bedrooms, a living room, an eat-in kitchen and a bathroom.

The young adults say H.O.M.E.S. is like a village. They can depend on each other to keep watch on their spaces. If they run out of food, they can knock on a neighbor's door for a meal. Or a chat.

Andre said his world changed when he was 16 and his mother, a registered nurse, died of cancer.

"When my mom died I lost everything," he said in a voice just above a whisper. Andre and his two younger siblings went into foster care.

Nowadays he has his mind set on becoming an entrepreneur and starting a business. Andre recently put his maintenance job on hold to attend Broward College.

Some young adults who find their way to H.O.M.E.S. had no guardian and were headed to living on the streets when they turned 18.

"The crazy thing is that all of us have mean stories to share," said Marcus Smith, 20, who moved in last year.

The former Miramar High School football player was raised by his grandmother in a comfortable middle-class neighborhood. But in his senior year his grandmother fell ill and died, and Smith was forced to leave their house.

He lived out of his car for a good part of that school year, until a friend referred him to HANDY (Helping Abused, Neglected and Disadvantaged Youth). There he learned he could apply for an apartment at H.O.M.E.S.

Smith plans to start college and play football again. He said even if he moves into a dorm, he will return to H.O.M.E.S. for frequent visits.

"The people here, they have your back," he said.

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