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\$280,000 State Grant to Polk Works Will Help Children Leaving Foster Care

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THE LEDGER

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LAKELAND | Polk Works has received \$280,000 to help foster children on their path to financial independence.

The county's workforce agency is one of three in the state to receive funding for a special program of the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation.

In all, AWI granted \$876,904 for its Youth Aging Out of Foster Care Project. The awards, announced Aug. 26, create innovative programs to give foster teens a boost with education, career development, jobs training and employment assistance.

Polk Works President and CEO Stacy Campbell-Domineck said in a news release the money 'offers a unique opportunity to help mitigate the risk factors youth often face as they transition out of the foster care system and into mainstream society.'

Other agencies receiving money were WorkNet #Pinellas, which received \$298,504, and the Center for Business Excellence in Daytona Beach, \$297,500.

The plight of youth who leave foster care when they turn 18 years old is well documented. In general, they fare poorly compared to others their age who have the benefit of traditional family support.

Many children who have been taken from parents because of abuse or neglect do find permanent foster homes or are adopted by their foster parents.

But many do not. For them, turning 18 means leaving state protection for the cold realities of adulthood.

Studies, according to an April 2009 report by the UCLA School of Public Affairs, show that:

75 percent of these teens who remain in school work below grade level.

46 percent do not complete high school.

51 percent are unemployed.

From 10 percent to 25 percent are homeless.

As many as 26,000 youth age out of foster care nationwide each year, the report said, and most are 'dropped from critical support and services and removed from the supervision of dependency courts.'

In Florida, 1,365 children aged out without a family in 2008, including 56 in Polk, according to the state Department of Children & Families.

Pregnancy, unemployment and lack of higher education are just some of the risk factors that Florida's AWI grant is designed to combat.

Polk Works will use its grant to assist 120 youth ages 18 to 21 in collaboration with Devereux Florida, a private, nonprofit agency providing foster care services in Polk.

Polk Works will help youth earn their GEDs, brush up resumes and prepare for job interviews, and help navigate the route to higher education.

These are many of the same services Devereux provides, but the grant will give an extra layer of help, said Arlalia Oldham-Wesley, youth programs contract manager for Polk Works.

That could mean linking them to other agencies for housing, health care and other needs, she said.

'This is somewhat of an expansion to try to find out what else we can do to help youth toward self-sufficiency,' Oldham-Wesley said.

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