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## Kids leaving foster care at 18 struggle in tough job market

September 14, 2011

Tamarra Lestage was 13 when she ran away from an abusive home and spent months sleeping in various parks with her belongings in a garbage bag.

She ate breakfast and lunch at school, keeping her life a secret. "I would borrow money to wash my clothes at the laundromat," said Lestage, of Fort Lauderdale, who was finally placed in foster care before her 14<sup>th</sup> birthday. "I didn't want the kids to know I was homeless."

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Eight years later, Lestage, 22, a Broward College student who has been on her own since 18, is applying some of those same survival skills to finding a job. In four months, the "road to independence" stipend she receives from the state will dry up and she will need income to pay her bills.

But the search is full of obstacles for teens who age out of foster care once they hit 18.

"For our kids, the plight is worse than the general person who is laid off" said P. Jeanne Tamargo, assistant director of permanency for ChildNet, which provides foster care services in Broward. "They don't have a family member that they can go to and ask to borrow money."

Many lack the resume and job preparation skills of their peers. Most don't have access to a car and they don't have the work history to compete with out-of-work adults, who are now vying for some of the same entry level jobs.

Although there are internships to give them work experience, the jobs are usually temporary. And with so many college graduates returning home without jobs, advocates say it's unrealistic to expect 23-year-olds without families to be fully self-sufficient.

In Florida, only about 47 percent of teens in foster care graduate with a high school diploma, according to state data. Nationally, the unemployment rate among "aged out" foster kids hovers around 56 percent. And about 15 percent become homeless for one or more months within 12 months of leaving foster care.

Between 2010 and 2011, about 100 teens in Broward and 80 in Palm Beach County aged out. Those enrolled in school who meet other requirements receive about \$1,200 a month from the state until they turn 23. They are eligible for free state college tuition and are covered by Medicaid. In addition, they get help finding low income housing.

Experts say furthering their education is critical. But in order to succeed in the workplace, they also need job shadowing and mentors.

"There are internships out there but there is also a lot of competition," said Raquel Chen, an employment coordinator at the FLITE Center in Lauderhill, a one-stop shop for foster care youth.

D'atra Franklin had a work-study job at Palm Beach Community College until it expired in August.

"Right now I'm looking for a waitress job," said Franklin, 21, of West Palm Beach, who is studying education.

She said the job market is not like it was when she was a teenager.

"I got my first job at 16 at McDonald's," she said. "Back then you could walk into a restaurant and asking for a job was easy. Now, you have to go through a continuous application process."

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And she said learning to network wasn't a priority back then.

"You have to deal with issues like 'Can I put this address on my job application when I'm not sure if I'll be in this home next week,'" said Franklin. "You're not thinking about a resume when you're thinking about where next meal going to come from."

Leacroft Bailey, 20, landed an internship at the Museum of Discovery and Science in Fort Lauderdale with the assistance of HANDY, (Helping Abused, Neglected and Disadvantaged Youth) about nine months ago.

Bailey said he guides visitors through exhibits. He takes a city bus to work and usually arrives an hour early, a habit he said he picked up in military school.

Before the internship, he was having a rough time finding a job. "Most of the time you hear. "I'll call you," but they never

call."

Damar Hylton, 19, wants to be an underwater welder.

Hylton, who was placed in foster care at 15, said he is working to obtain his GED and a \$1,256 a month state stipend helps to cover his monthly expenses.

Recently, at the Flite Center, he worked with Chen on job hunting techniques.

"I'm working on a resume," said Hylton, explaining it needs to be good because there's no one for him to fall back on.

Nichola Peak, 25, of Pembroke Pines, a skills development coordinator at the Flite Center, said she entered the state's care when she was two. Both of her parents were addicted to drugs and her father's sister raised her.

She graduated from Florida Atlantic University and said her contacts in the foster care system have guided her. She said she can relate to some of those she works with.

"It wasn't that long ago that I was in their shoes," she said.

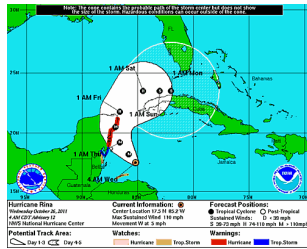
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