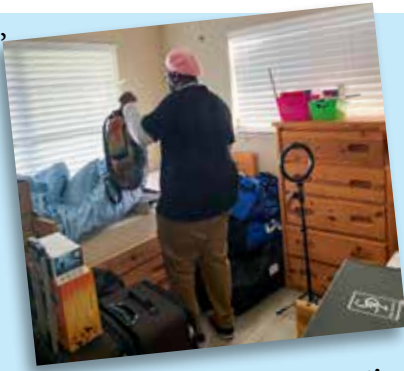


Life After Foster Care – What Next?



In the United States, more than 23,000 youth exit foster care annually and are left to fend for themselves. Exiting foster care without sufficient services and support carries lifelong consequences. Youth who age out of foster care are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, and are likely to experience hardships such as homelessness, incarceration, joblessness, early parenthood, and substance abuse. With **Florida having the third largest number of children in foster care nationally**, this issue is compounded and presents as a

significant social service issue.

California	52,337
Texas	32,960
FLORIDA	24,404
Indiana	18,560
Illinois	16,840

Data obtained from Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) 2019

At SOS Children's Villages Florida, we are addressing the issues facing young adults aging out of care, through our "NEXT STEPS" program. This program provides a continuum of services to help young adults with resources in the areas of education, affordable housing, employment, financial literacy, and connections to a host of other community services. Our program is open to both former foster youth who lived on our SOS campus, as well as those who come from the community. NEXT STEPS has grown through majority funding support from the Frederick A. Deluca and Jim Moran Foundations. We currently have 150 young adults participating, and there is a waiting list as we are at full capacity.



Meet LASHONDA CROSS NEXT STEPS Program Director As She Shares Insight Into The NEXT STEPS Program

Q: How do you and your team service those in the NEXT STEPS program?

A: Each person is different and comes into the program with unique needs. We identify where a person is in their life and work to match their needs to offer support.

Q: How do people hear about the program?

A: The majority of referrals come from peers sharing their experience in the program. Others come through community partners such as ChildNet, FLITE Center, and 4Kids.

Q: What is the most gratifying aspect of the work you do?

A: Seeing goals accomplished. It can be something as small as opening a bank account and saving even \$50 or \$100.

Q: Understanding that it can be difficult to find yourself on your own as a young adult needing to figure out how to navigate the world. How do you help motivate them?

A: Sometimes it involves me calling them every morning to make sure they are up and ready to face the day. I ask questions such as are they properly groomed for work, do they have uber and or gas cards – sometimes I will ask if they have sufficient food.

Q: What is your proudest moment?

A: I had someone who was sleeping in his car after getting his master's degree. He was resistant to accepting support, as he felt that this was part of his journey. He went on to get his MBA and is now a practicing attorney.

Q: What do you see as the biggest hurdle to overcome?

A: Affordable housing is a huge challenge. We try to work around this by collaborating with other agencies. This continues to be difficult.

Q: What are ways people can help?

A: There are so many! Cooking classes are always a hit. Just hosting a group of 10 or 12 is appreciated. Grocery gift cards are another item in high demand. Applications for food stamps are slow to be approved due to agencies being short staffed. Etiquette training is helpful so that our young adults can be comfortable navigating business and social situations. Finally, as they transition into their own homes, bedding, linens, and towels are at the top of the list along with gas and Uber gift cards.

If you would like to help, you can contact Lashonda at lcross@sosflorida.com.