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GUEST COLUMNIST

For foster youth, the road to independence is steep

Imagine going for a hike along an unmarked trail without a map or a compass. You're without food and other supplies you might need to navigate the wilderness. Would it come as a surprise if you got lost or gave up along the way?

Every young adult has their own "mountain" to climb on the way to adulthood. However, for those coming out of the child welfare system, like me, the path is much steeper. Unlike other teenagers, we may not have the guidance of trusted adults or strong role models who can help handle the challenges ahead, and many of us lack the essential tools for life as an independent adult: A driver's license. A resume. Work experience. A diploma. Money to pay rent or cover bills.

As a foster kid myself, I know how much of a difference that makes. Hundreds of Florida children will turn 18 while in foster care this year, and statistics suggest that more than



By Edward Grillo

one in five of them will go on to experience homelessness. Only half will find steady work by the age of 24, and just 3% will earn a college degree.

In 2004, Florida's leaders took the first step to improving outcomes for kids in foster care by adopting the community-based care model. That created a bigger system of support that doesn't end the day we turn 18.

This layer of protection is available until the age of 23 — but increasing awareness of and access to these programs is essential.

It may sound cliché, but our past doesn't dictate our future. Look at me: I was placed in foster care when I was 16. Initially I was very upset, but as time went on and as I learned about different opportunities, I took advantage of each one that I could — and realized things weren't so bad. Now, I'm a sophomore in college, studying radio and TV production.

It hasn't been easy, but it's been easier because of the support system put in place

to help me. When I think of where I am today, it's because of two key components of community-based care.

First, kids in care need to be empowered to face the future with a strong foundation of financial literacy and life skills that they may not learn at home. They need ongoing support from caring mentors and counselors — as well as help finding housing, education, and employment.

The good news is that Florida has already made great strides thanks to local nonprofit agencies, like Embrace Families, leading the way. Orlando-based programs like "Keys to Independence," an initiative designed to help teens in foster care get their driver's licenses, are now being introduced nationwide. But that's just one example. Florida has also created partnerships that help foster youth pay for college, secure internships, gain work experience, and benefit from a comprehensive healthcare plan.

Second, but just as important: Youth in

foster care need a chance to make their voices heard. In 2018, I had the opportunity to do just that when I won the Able Trust speech contest and had a platform to share my experiences with others. I've also had other opportunities to share my experiences and discuss issues that plague current and former youths in care. Not only do conversations like these build a better understanding of the challenges faced by foster kids, but they also provide unique perspectives and ideas that can change our communities for the better.

This year, today marks the statewide Foster Youth Voice Day, which recognizes that young adults in the child welfare system need to have an active role in making decisions about their lives. I believe it and I live it, so today, I'm using my voice to continue advocating change.

Edward Grillo is a sophomore at the University of Central Florida. For more information, visit EmbraceFamilies.org or onevoiceimpact.org.

For foster youth, the road to independence is steep | Commentary

By EDWARD GRILLO
GUEST COLUMNIST | NOV 04, 2021 AT 5:30 AM



Imagine going for a hike along an unmarked trail without a map or a compass. You're without food and other supplies you might need to navigate the wilderness. Would it come as a surprise if you got lost or gave up along the way?

Every young adult has their own "mountain" to climb on the way to adulthood. However, for those coming out of the child welfare system, like me, the path is much steeper. Unlike other teenagers, we may not have the guidance of trusted adults or strong role models who can help handle the challenges ahead, and many of us lack the essential tools for life as an independent adult: A drivers license. A resume. Work experience. A diploma. Money to pay rent or cover bills.



Edward Grillo, pictured at his high-school graduation, is now a sophomore at the University of Central Florida. (Courtesy photo)

As a foster kid myself, I know how much of a difference that makes. Hundreds of Florida children will turn 18 while in foster care this year, and statistics suggest that more than one in five of them will go on to experience homelessness. Only half will find steady work by the age of 24, and just 3% will earn a college degree.

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It hasn't been easy, but it's been *easier* because of the support system put in place to help me. When I think of where I am today, it's because of two key components of community-based care.

First, kids in care need to be empowered to face the future with a strong foundation of financial literacy and life skills that they may not learn at home. They need ongoing support from caring mentors and counselors — as well as help finding housing, education, and employment.

The good news is that Florida has already made great strides thanks to local nonprofit agencies, like Embrace Families, leading the way. Orlando-based programs like “Keys to Independence,” an initiative designed to help teens in foster care get their drivers licenses, are now being introduced nationwide. But that’s just one example. Florida has also created partnerships that help foster youth pay for college, secure internships, gain work experience, and benefit from a comprehensive healthcare plan.

But we can’t stop here. The more we improve, the brighter the future.

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Edward Grillo is a sophomore at the University of Central Florida. For more information, visit [EmbraceFamilies.org](https://www.EmbraceFamilies.org) or [onevoiceimpaact.org](https://www.onevoiceimpaact.org).